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MIGHTIEST MONARCH OF A TIME-LOST LAND!
KING CONAN™
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DEATH BEYOND THE RIVER STYX!
BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU!

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend..."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ***ROBERT E. HOWARD***

ROY THOMAS SCRIPTER / EDITOR * JOHN BUSCEMA & ERNIE CHAN ILLUSTRATORS * JOE ROSEN, LETTERER G. ROUSSOS, COLORIST * JIM SHOOTER CONSULTING EDITOR

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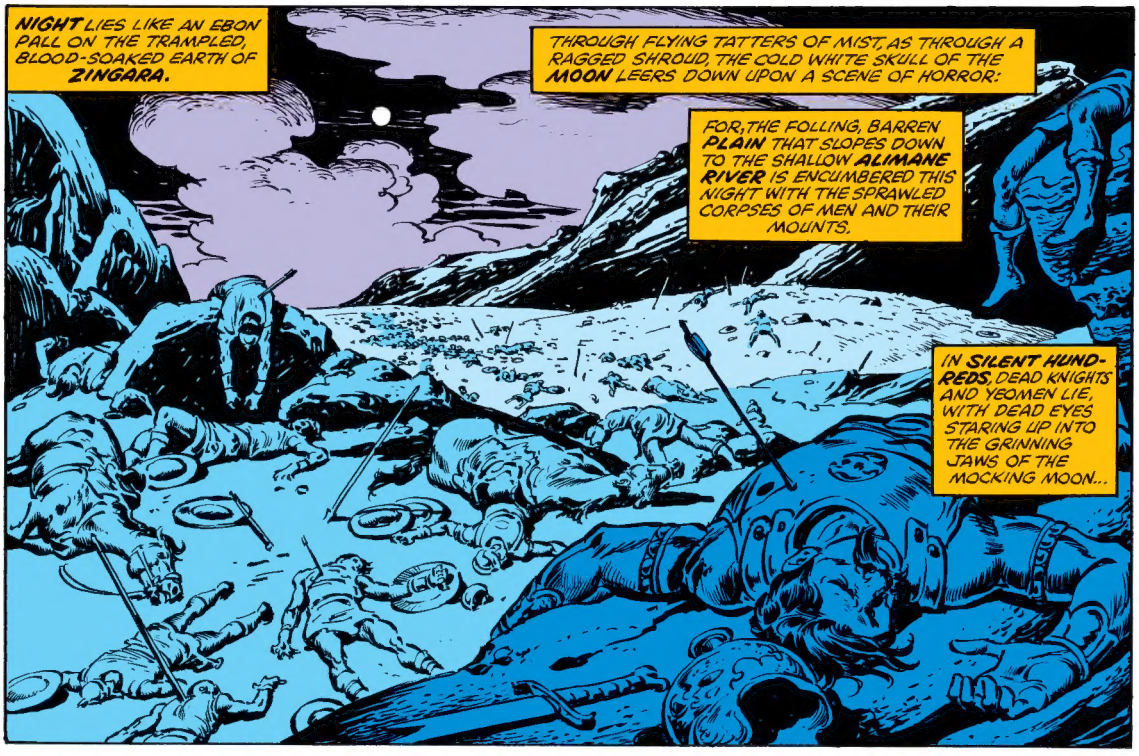
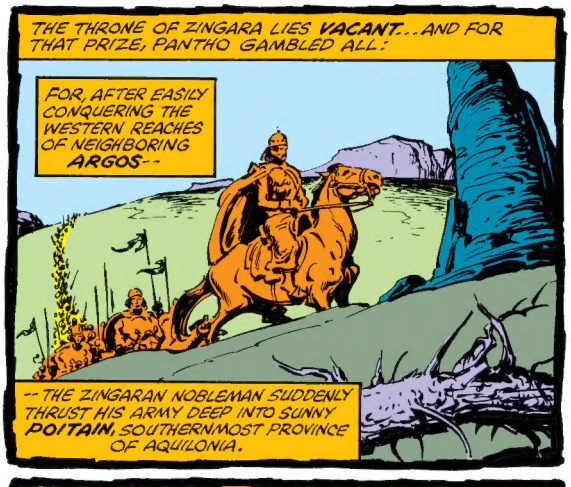
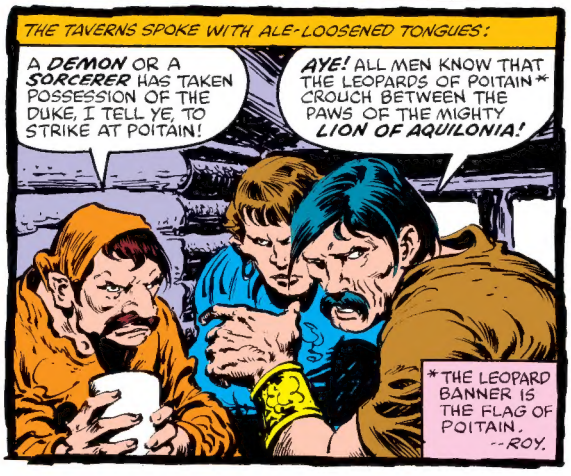
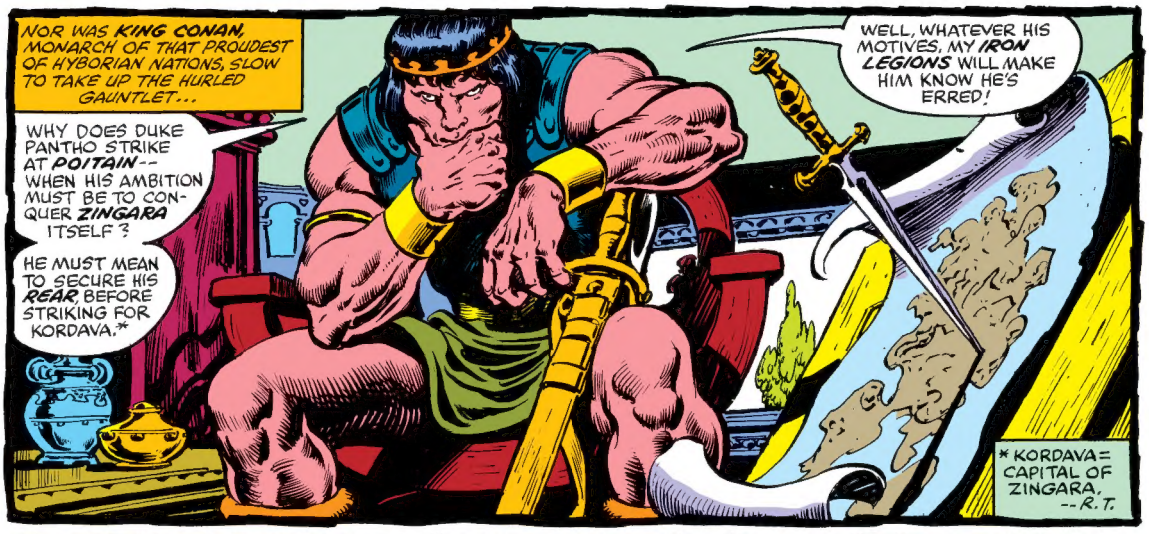

NIGHT LIES LIKE AN EBON PALL ON THE TRAMPLED, BLOOD-SOAKED EARTH OF ZINGARA.
THROUGH FLYING TATTERS OF MIST, AS THROUGH A RAGGED SHROUD, THE COLD WHITE SKULL OF THE MOON LEERS DOWN UPON A SCENE OF HORROR:
FOR, THE FOLLING, BARREN PLAIN THAT SLOPES DOWN TO THE SHALLOW ALIMANE RIVER IS ENCUMBERED THIS NIGHT WITH THE SPRAWLED CORPSES OF MEN AND THEIR MOUNTS.
IN SILENT HUNDREDS, DEAD KNIGHTS AND YEOMEN LIE, WITH DEAD EYES STARING UP INTO THE GRINNING JAWS OF THE MOCKING MOON...

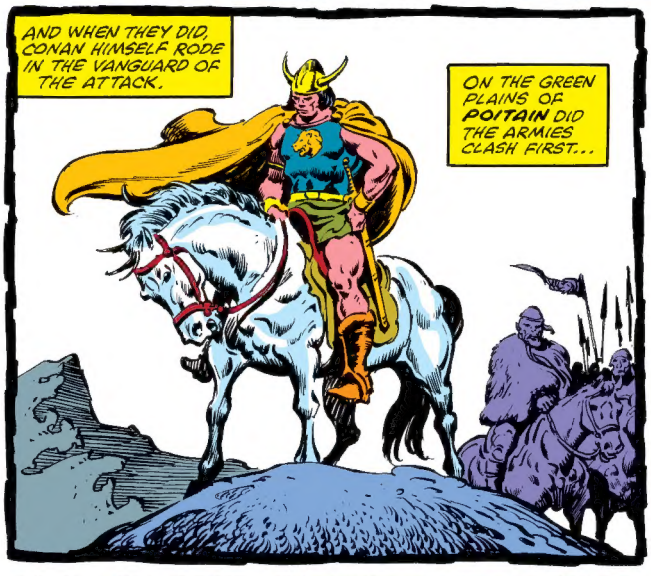
...WHILE THE HIDEOUS MIRTH OF HYENAS RINGS WEIRDLY THROUGH THE STILL AIR.
NOT FOR NAUGHT IS THIS GRIM REGION CALLED... THE PLACE OF SKULLS.

HERE IT IS THAT THE BRIGHT IMPERIAL DREAMS OF PANTHO, DUKE OF GUARRALID, WERE DROWNED IN DARKNESS...
...HIS VAULTING AMBITION DRENCHED IN BLOOD.

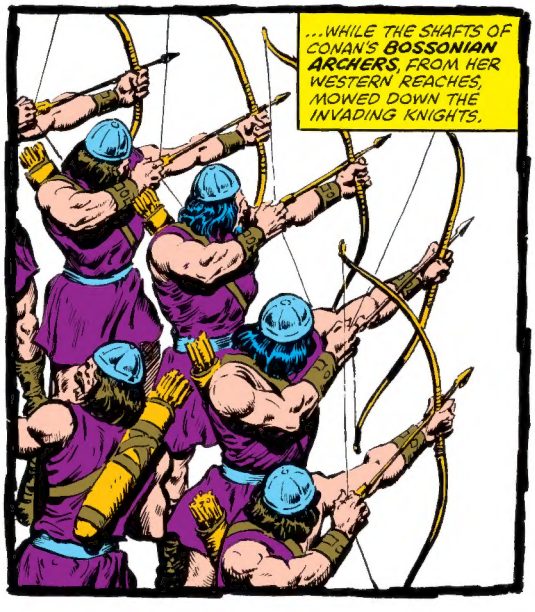

THE THRONE OF ZINGARA LIES VACANT...AND FOR THAT PRIZE, PANTHO GAMBLED ALL!
FOR, AFTER EASILY CONQUERING THE WESTERN REACHES OF NEIGHBORING ARGOS--
--THE ZINGARAN NOBLEMAN SUDDENLY THRUST HIS ARMY DEEP INTO SUNNY POITAIN, SOUTHERNMOST PROVINCE OF AQUILONIA.


THE TAVERNS SPOKE WITH ALE-LOOSENED TONGUES:
A DEMON OR A SORCERER HAS TAKEN POSSESSION OF THE DUKE, I TELL YE, TO STRIKE AT POITAIN!
AYE! ALL MEN KNOW THAT THE LEOPARDS OF POITAIN* CROUCH BETWEEN THE PAWS OF THE MIGHTY LION OF AQUILONIA!
*THE LEOPARD BANNER IS THE FLAG OF POITAIN. --ROY.

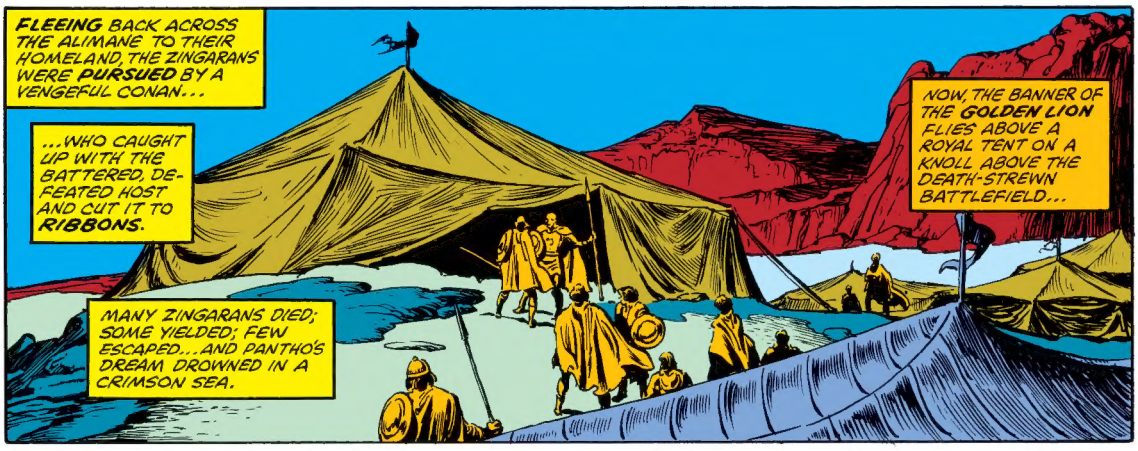

NOR WAS KING CONAN, MONARCH OF THAT PROUDEST OF HYBORIAN NATIONS, SLOW TO TAKE UP THE HURLED GAUNTLET...
WHY DOES DUKE PANTHO STRIKE AT POITAIN-- WHEN HIS AMBITION MUST BE TO CONQUER ZINGARA ITSELF?
HE MUST MEAN TO SECURE HIS REAR BEFORE STRIKING FOR KORDAVA.*
WELL, WHATEVER HIS MOTIVES, MY IRON LEGIONS WILL MAKE HIM KNOW HE'S ERRED!
* KORDAVA = CAPITAL OF ZINGARA, --R.T.

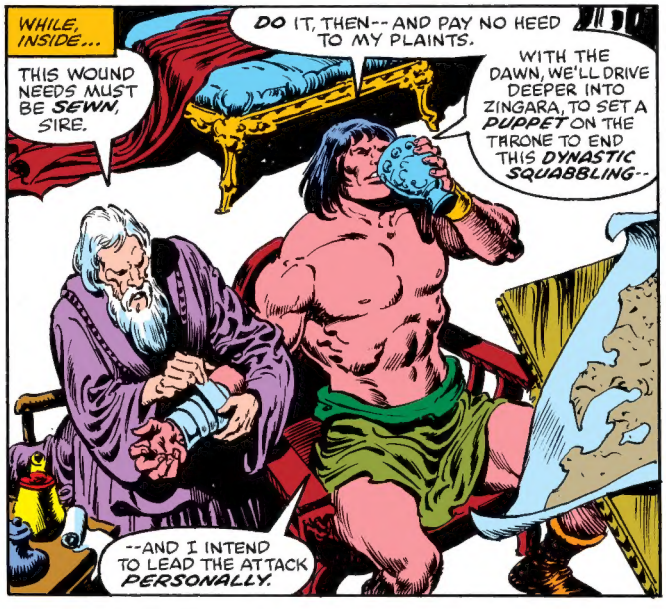

AND WHEN THEY DID, CONAN HIMSELF RODE IN THE VANGUARD OF THE ATTACK.
ON THE GREEN PLAINS OF POITAIN DID THE ARMIES CLASH FIRST...

THE WILD ZINGARAN CHARGE BROKE LIKE THE SURF AGAINST THE STOLID PIKEMEN OF GUNDERLAND, AQUILONIA'S NORTHERN PROVINCE...

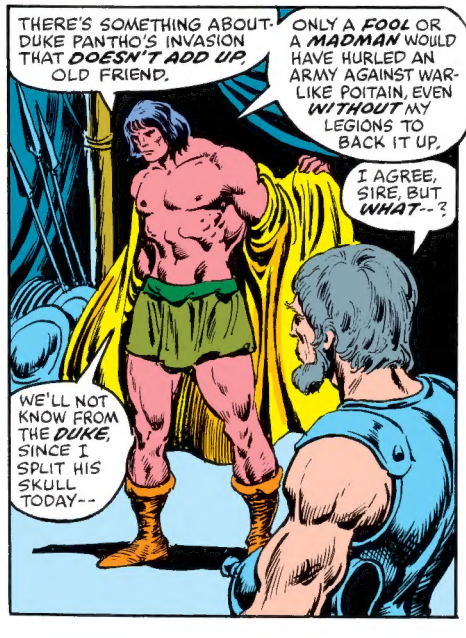

...WHILE THE SHAFTS OF CONAN'S BOSSONIAN ARCHERS, FROM HER WESTERN REACHES, MOWED DOWN THE INVADING KNIGHTS.

THEN, AS PANTHO WITHDREW HIS MOUNTED KNIGHTS TO REGROUP, CONAN'S OWN GUARD, THE BLACK DRAGONS, LED THE AQUILONIAN CHARGE...
ON, LADS! LET'S TEACH THE ZINGARAN DOGS WHERE THE BORDERS LIE!

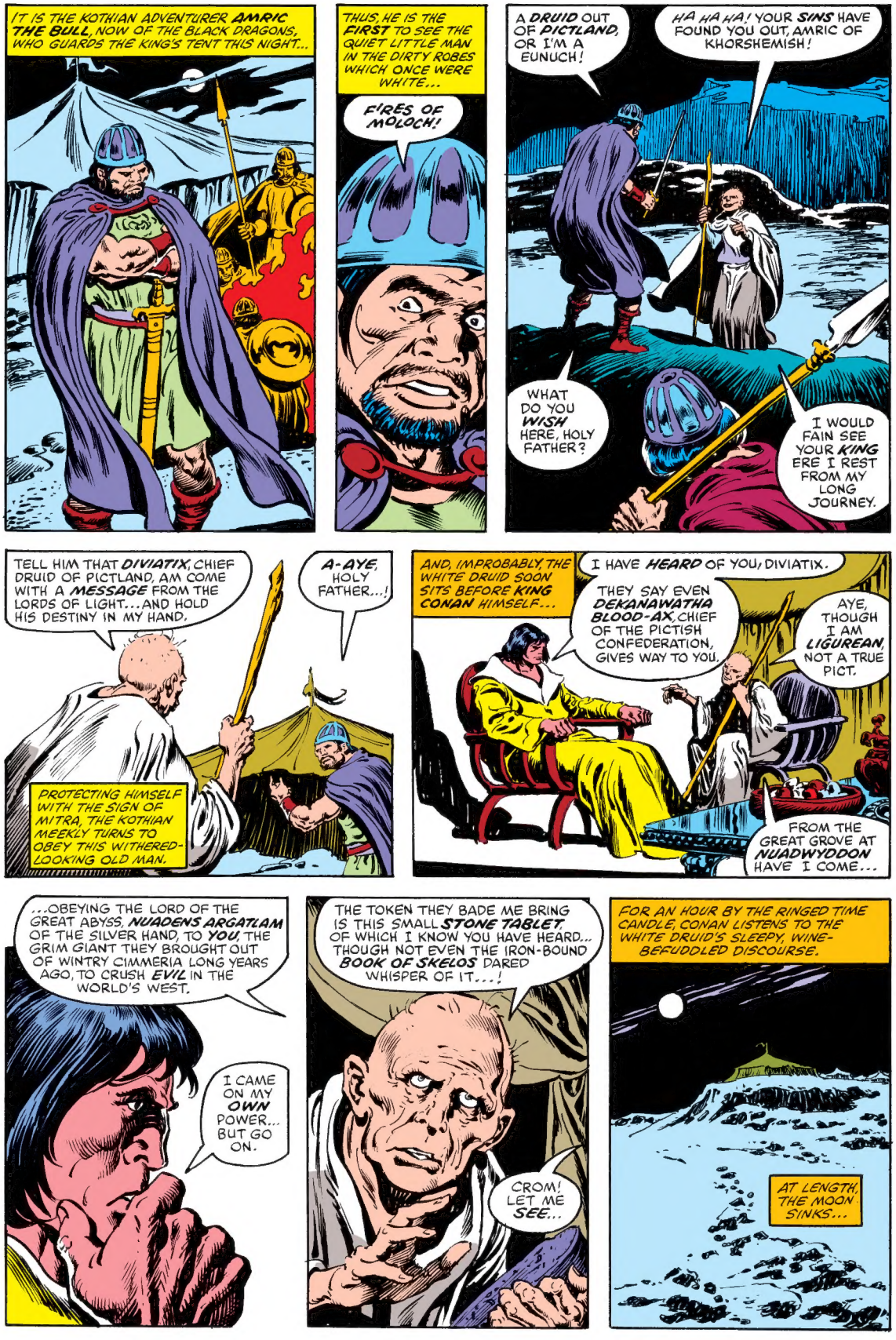

FLEEING BACK ACROSS THE ALIMANE TO THEIR HOMELAND, THE ZINGARANS WERE PURSUED BY A VENGEFUL CONAN...
...WHO CAUGHT UP WITH THE BATTERED, DEFEATED HOST AND CUT IT TO RIBBONS.
MANY ZINGARANS DIED; SOME YIELDED; FEW ESCAPED...AND PANTHO'S DREAM DROWNED IN A CRIMSON SEA.
NOW, THE BANNER OF THE GOLDEN LION FLIES ABOVE A ROYAL TENT ON A KNOLL ABOVE THE DEATH-STREWN BATTLEFIELD...

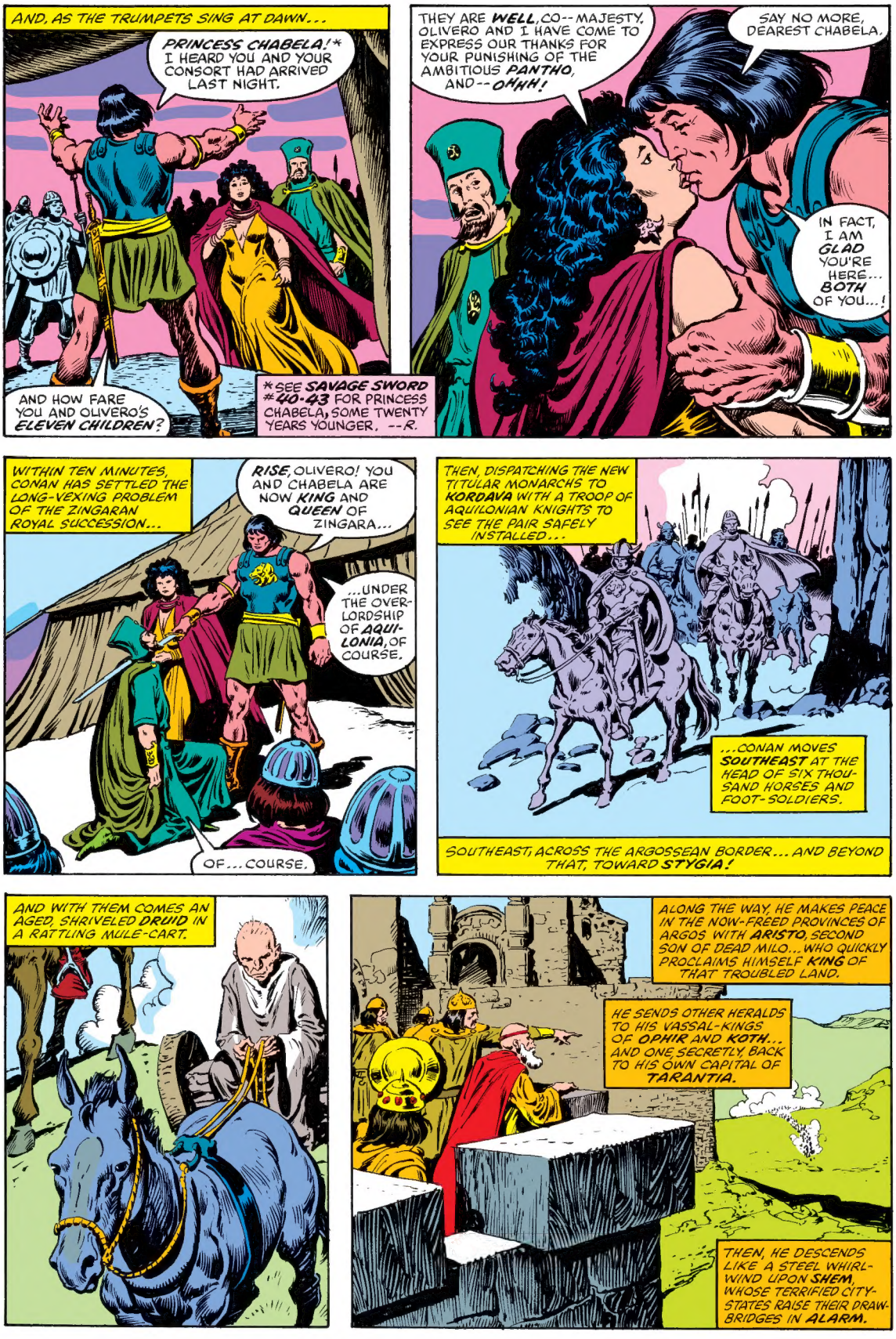

WHILE, INSIDE...
THIS WOUND NEEDS MUST BE SEWN, SIRE.
DO IT, THEN-- AND PAY NO HEED TO MY PLAINTS.
WITH THE DAWN, WE'LL DRIVE DEEPER INTO ZINGARA, TO SET A PUPPET ON THE THRONE TO END THIS DYNASTIC SQUABBLING--
--AND I INTEND TO LEAD THE ATTACK PERSONALLY.

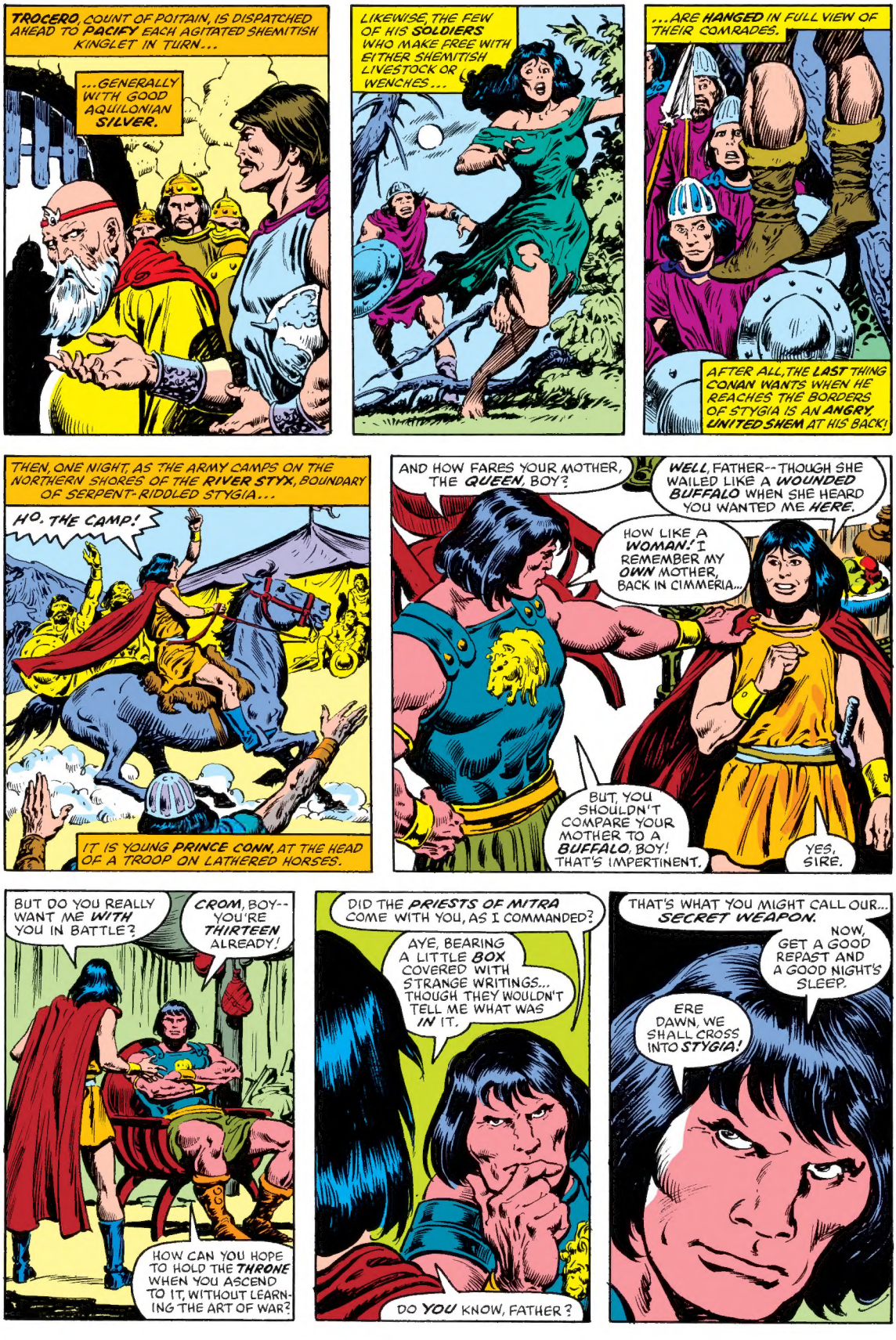
GENERAL PALLANTIDES-- WHICH IS THE QUICKEST ROUTE FROM HERE TO STYGIA?
THAT ONE, SIRE.
AH, YES! I FOLLOWED IT HERE WHEN I FLED XALTOTUN'S WIZARDRY, SOME FIFTEEN YEARS AGO.*
*AS NARRATED IN OUR ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL CONAN THE CONQUEROR. --ROY.

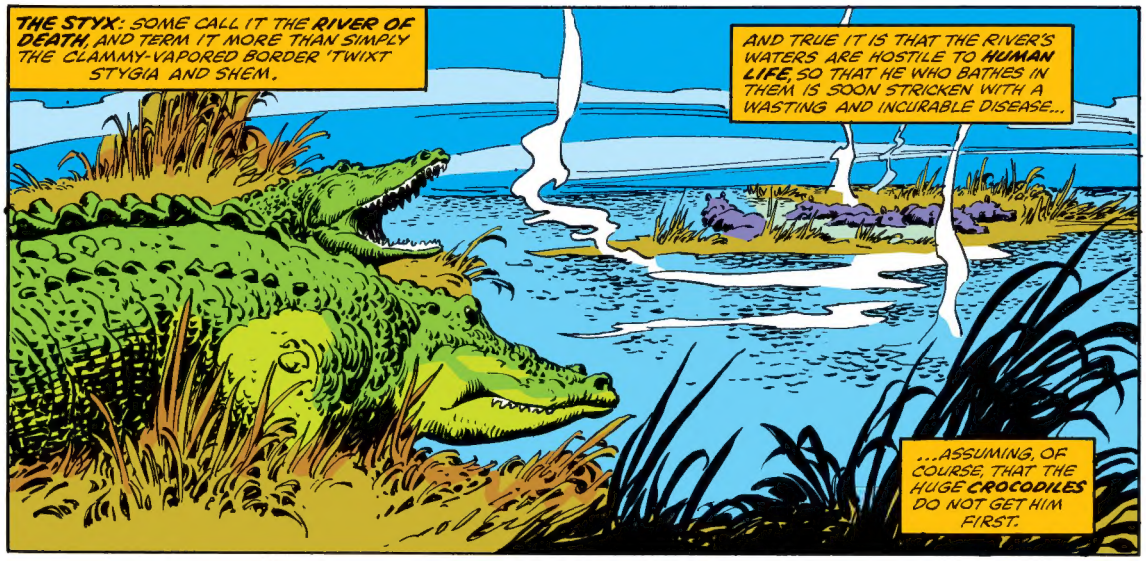

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT DUKE PANTHO'S INVASION THAT DOESN'T ADD UP, OLD FRIEND.
ONLY A FOOL OR A MADMAN WOULD HAVE HURLED AN ARMY AGAINST WARLIKE POITAIN, EVEN WITHOUT MY LEGIONS TO BACK IT UP.
I AGREE, SIRE, BUT WHAT--?
WE'LL NOT KNOW FROM THE DUKE, SINCE I SPLIT HIS SKULL TODAY--

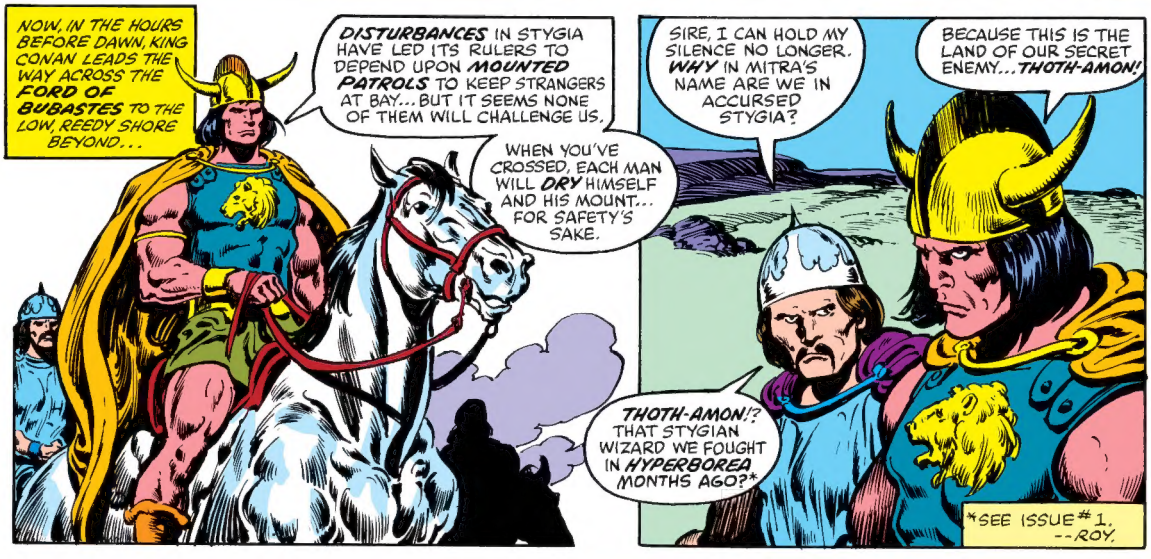
--BUT I KNEW HIM OF OLD, AND THINK HE WAS NEITHER MAD NOR FOOLISH.
I SUSPECT AN UNSEEN HAND BEHIND PANTHO'S MAD EXPEDITION-- A PLOT OF SOME KIND.
IN FACT, I SMELL... SORCERY.
LEAVE ME NOW. I WOULD THINK FURTHER ON THIS...!


IT IS THE KOTHIAN ADVENTURER AMRIC THE BULL, NOW OF THE BLACK DRAGONS, WHO GUARDS THE KING'S TENT THIS NIGHT...
THUS, HE IS THE FIRST TO SEE THE QUIET LITTLE MAN IN THE DIRTY ROBES WHICH ONCE WERE WHITE...
FIRES OF MOLOCH!
A DRUID OUT OF PICTLAND, OR I'M A EUNUCH!
HA HA HA! YOUR SINS HAVE FOUND YOU OUT, AMRIC OF KHORSHEMISH!
WHAT DO YOU WISH HERE, HOLY FATHER?
I WOULD FAIN SEE YOUR KING ERE I REST FROM MY LONG JOURNEY.
TELL HIM THAT DIVIATIX, CHIEF DRUID OF PICTLAND, AM COME WITH A MESSAGE FROM THE LORDS OF LIGHT... AND HOLD HIS DESTINY IN MY HAND.
A-AYE, HOLY FATHER...!
PROTECTING HIMSELF WITH THE SIGN OF MITRA, THE KOTHIAN MEEKLY TURNS TO OBEY THIS WITHERED-LOOKING OLD MAN.
AND, IMPROBABLY, THE WHITE DRUID SOON SITS BEFORE KING CONAN HIMSELF...
I HAVE HEARD OF YOU, DIVIATIX.
THEY SAY EVEN DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX, CHIEF OF THE PICTISH CONFEDERATION, GIVES WAY TO YOU.
AYE, THOUGH I AM LIGUREAN, NOT A TRUE PICT.
FROM THE GREAT GROVE AT NUADWYDON HAVE I COME...
...OBEYING THE LORD OF THE GREAT ABYSS, NUADENS ARGATLAM OF THE SILVER HAND, TO YOU, THE GRIM GIANT THEY BROUGHT OUT OF WINTRY CIMMERIA LONG YEARS AGO, TO CRUSH EVIL IN THE WORLD'S WEST.
I CAME ON MY OWN POWER... BUT GO ON.
THE TOKEN THEY BADE ME BRING IS THIS SMALL STONE TABLET, OF WHICH I KNOW YOU HAVE HEARD... THOUGH NOT EVEN THE IRON-BOUND BOOK OF SKELOS DARED WHISPER OF IT...!
CROM! LET ME SEE...
FOR AN HOUR BY THE RINGED TIME CANDLE, CONAN LISTENS TO THE WHITE DRUID'S SLEEPY, WINE-BEFUDDLED DISCOURSE.
AT LENGTH, THE MOON SINKS...

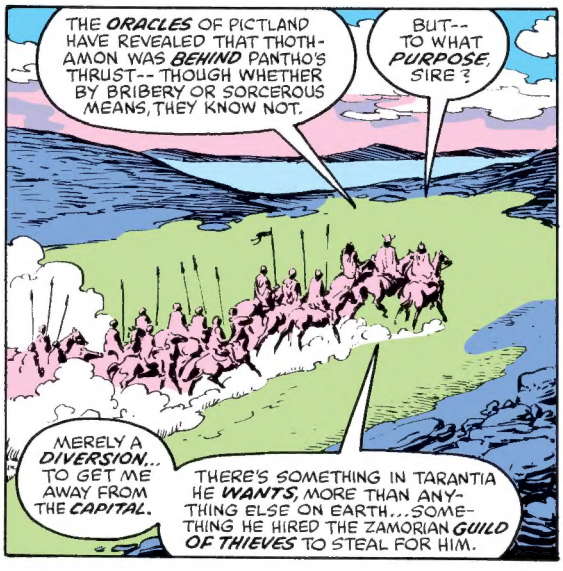

AND, AS THE TRUMPETS SING AT DAWN...
PRINCESS CHABELA!* I HEARD YOU AND YOUR CONSORT HAD ARRIVED LAST NIGHT.
AND HOW FARE YOU AND OLIVERO'S ELEVEN CHILDREN?
*SEE SAVAGE SWORD #40-43 FOR PRINCESS CHABELA, SOME TWENTY YEARS YOUNGER. --R.
THEY ARE WELL, CO-- MAJESTY. OLIVERO AND I HAVE COME TO EXPRESS OUR THANKS FOR YOUR PUNISHING OF THE AMBITIOUS PANTHO, AND--OHHH!
SAY NO MORE, DEAREST CHABELA.
IN FACT, I AM GLAD YOU'RE HERE... BOTH OF YOU...!
WITHIN TEN MINUTES, CONAN HAS SETTLED THE LONG-VEXING PROBLEM OF THE ZINGARAN ROYAL SUCCESSION...
RISE, OLIVERO! YOU AND CHABELA ARE NOW KING AND QUEEN OF ZINGARA...
...UNDER THE OVER-LORDSHIP OF AQUILONIA, OF COURSE.
OF... COURSE.
THEN, DISPATCHING THE NEW TITULAR MONARCHS TO KORDAVA WITH A TROOP OF AQUILONIAN KNIGHTS TO SEE THE PAIR SAFELY INSTALLED...
...CONAN MOVES SOUTHEAST AT THE HEAD OF SIX THOUSAND HORSES AND FOOT-SOLDIERS.
SOUTHEAST, ACROSS THE ARGOSSEAN BORDER... AND BEYOND THAT, TOWARD STYGIA!
AND WITH THEM COMES AN AGED, SHRIVELED DRUID IN A RATTLING MULE-CART.
ALONG THE WAY, HE MAKES PEACE IN THE NOW-FREED PROVINCES OF ARGOS WITH ARISTO, SECOND SON OF DEAD MILO... WHO QUICKLY PROCLAIMS HIMSELF KING OF THAT TROUBLED LAND.
HE SENDS OTHER HERALDS TO HIS VASSAL-KINGS OF OPHIR AND KOTH... AND ONE, SECRETLY, BACK TO HIS OWN CAPITAL OF TARANTIA.
THEN, HE DESCENDS LIKE A STEEL WHIRLWIND UPON SHEM, WHOSE TERRIFIED CITY-STATES RAISE THEIR DRAWBRIDGES IN ALARM.


TROCERO, COUNT OF POITAIN, IS DISPATCHED AHEAD TO PACIFY EACH AGITATED SHEMITISH KINGLET IN TURN...
...GENERALLY WITH GOOD AQUILONIAN SILVER.
LIKEWISE, THE FEW OF HIS SOLDIERS WHO MAKE FREE WITH EITHER SHEMITISH LIVESTOCK OR WENCHES...
...ARE HANGED IN FULL VIEW OF THEIR COMRADES.
AFTER ALL, THE LAST THING CONAN WANTS WHEN HE REACHES THE BORDERS OF STYGIA IS AN ANGRY, UNITED SHEM AT HIS BACK!
THEN, ONE NIGHT, AS THE ARMY CAMPS ON THE NORTHERN SHORES OF THE RIVER STYX, BOUNDARY OF SERPENT-RIDDLED STYGIA...
HO. THE CAMP!
IT IS YOUNG PRINCE CONN, AT THE HEAD OF A TROOP ON LATHERED HORSES.
AND HOW FARES YOUR MOTHER, THE QUEEN, BOY?
WELL, FATHER--THOUGH SHE WAILED LIKE A WOUNDED BUFFALO WHEN SHE HEARD YOU WANTED ME HERE.
HOW LIKE A WOMAN! I REMEMBER MY OWN MOTHER, BACK IN CIMMERIA...
BUT, YOU SHOULDN'T COMPARE YOUR MOTHER TO A BUFFALO, BOY! THAT'S IMPERTINENT.
YES, SIRE.
BUT DO YOU REALLY WANT ME WITH YOU IN BATTLE?
CROM, BOY--YOU'RE THIRTEEN ALREADY!
HOW CAN YOU HOPE TO HOLD THE THRONE WHEN YOU ASCEND TO IT, WITHOUT LEARNING THE ART OF WAR?
DID THE PRIESTS OF MITRA COME WITH YOU, AS I COMMANDED?
AYE, BEARING A LITTLE BOX COVERED WITH STRANGE WRITINGS... THOUGH THEY WOULDN'T TELL ME WHAT WAS IN IT.
DO YOU KNOW, FATHER?
THAT'S WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL OUR... SECRET WEAPON.
NOW, GET A GOOD REPAST AND A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.
ERE DAWN, WE SHALL CROSS INTO STYGIA!

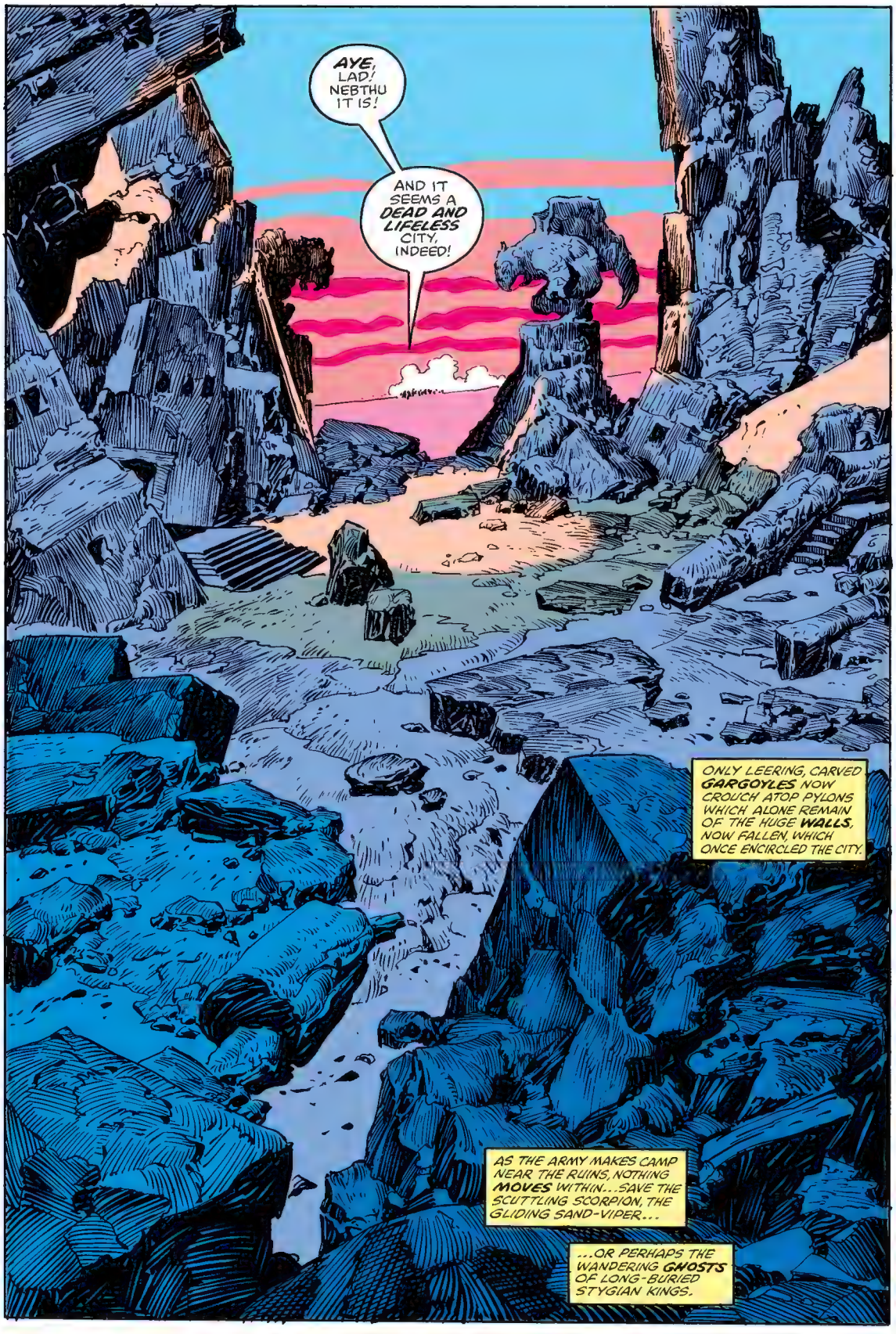

THE STYX: SOME CALL IT THE RIVER OF DEATH, AND TERM IT MORE THAN SIMPLY THE CLAMMY-VAPORED BORDER 'TWIXT STYGIA AND SHEM.
AND TRUE IT IS THAT THE RIVER'S WATERS ARE HOSTILE TO HUMAN LIFE, SO THAT HE WHO BATHES IN THEM IS SOON STRICKEN WITH A WASTING AND INCURABLE DISEASE...
...ASSUMING, OF COURSE, THAT THE HUGE CROCODILES DO NOT GET HIM FIRST.

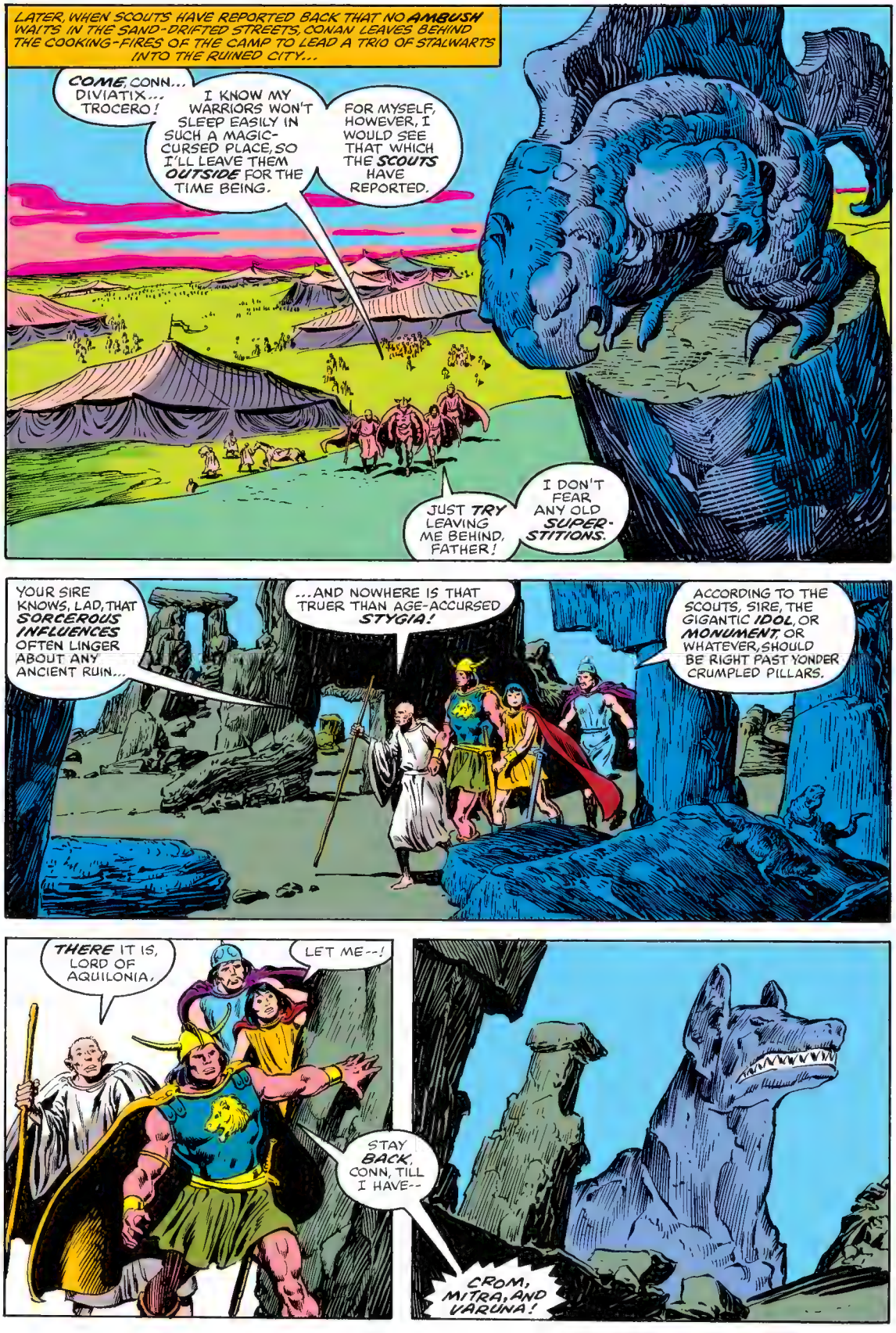

NOW, IN THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN, KING CONAN LEADS THE WAY ACROSS THE FORD OF BUBASTES TO THE LOW, REEDY SHORE BEYOND...
DISTURBANCES IN STYGIA HAVE LED ITS RULERS TO DEPEND UPON MOUNTED PATROLS TO KEEP STRANGERS AT BAY... BUT IT SEEMS NONE OF THEM WILL CHALLENGE US.
WHEN YOU'VE CROSSED, EACH MAN WILL DRY HIMSELF AND HIS MOUNT... FOR SAFETY'S SAKE.
SIRE, I CAN HOLD MY SILENCE NO LONGER. WHY IN MITRA'S NAME ARE WE IN ACCURSED STYGIA?
BECAUSE THIS IS THE LAND OF OUR SECRET ENEMY... THOTH-AMON!
THOTH-AMON!? THAT STYGIAN WIZARD WE FOUGHT IN HYPERBOREA MONTHS AGO?*
*SEE ISSUE #1. --ROY.

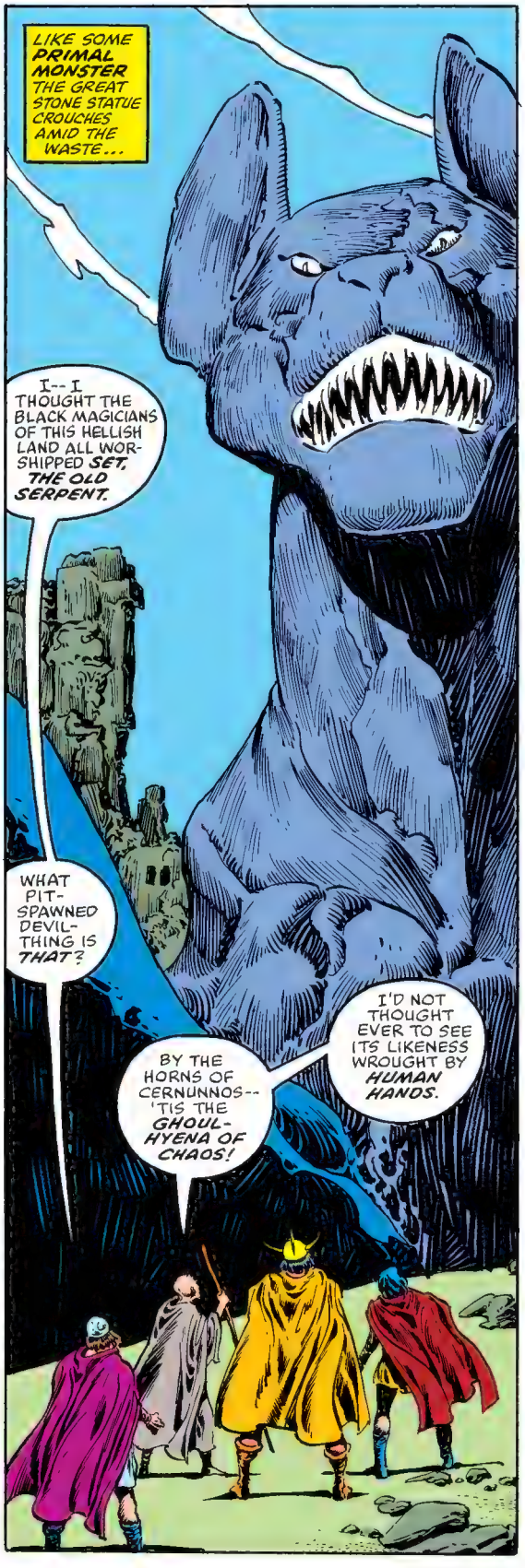
AYE, TROCERO! THERE'S ONLY ONE THOTH-AMON, MY FATHER HAS EVER SAID.
WOULD TO CROM THERE WILL BE NONE, ONE DAY!
THE WHITE DRUID BORE ME WARNING OF HIS SCHEMES.
BUT WHAT HAS ALL THIS TO DO WITH DUKE PANTHO'S ATTACK ON POITAIN?


THE ORACLES OF PICTLAND HAVE REVEALED THAT THOTH-AMON WAS BEHIND PANTHO'S THRUST-- THOUGH WHETHER BY BRIBERY OR SORCEROUS MEANS, THEY KNOW NOT.
BUT-- TO WHAT PURPOSE, SIRE?
MERELY A DIVERSION... TO GET ME AWAY FROM THE CAPITAL.
THERE'S SOMETHING IN TARANTIA HE WANTS, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE ON EARTH... SOMETHING HE HIRED THE ZAMORIAN GUILD OF THIEVES TO STEAL FOR HIM.

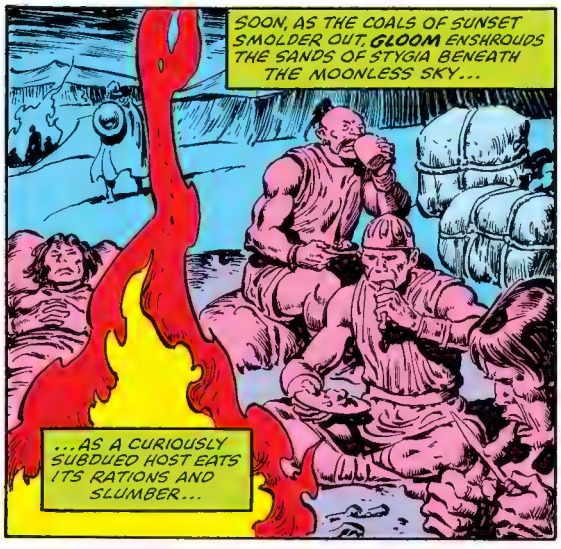
BUT, THOTH-AMON MISCALCULATED-- NEVER DREAMING I WOULD SMASH PANTHO SO QUICKLY, NOR THAT THE ORACLE OF PICTLAND WOULD WARN ME OF THE PLOT.
HE STILL THINKS ME IN THE NORTH, CHASING THE ZINGARAN OVER HILL AND DALE.
DIVIATIX HAS KEPT OUR DESCENT INTO STYGIA INVISIBLE EVEN TO HIS MAGIC...OR SO HE HOPES.
SIRE-- WHAT IS THIS THING THE STYGIAN MAGE WANTS SO DESPERATELY?
I KNOW, COUNT! IT IS--
O KING! THE MEN ARE READY TO MARCH!
THEN GIVE THE SIGNAL, PALLANTIDES!
AS THE ARMY TURNS SOUTHWARD AND INLAND, A CURSE SEEMS TO OVERHANG THIS ANCIENT LAND... A SUBTLE THING, MOCKING WHISPERS IN AN EERIE WIND, THE HAUNTING SENSATION OF EYES AT THEIR BACKS.
CROSSING THE BAKHR, A SMALL TRIBUTARY OF THE STYX, THEY PASS A STYGIAN VILLAGE...
BUT ITS INHABITANTS ARE MORE INTERESTED IN FLEEING THAN IN WARNING THEIR DISTANT RULERS.
FATHER, I ALWAYS HEARD THAT THOTH-AMON DWELT AT AN OASIS CALLED KHAJAR, FAR WEST OF HERE.
NO MORE, LAD. NOW, HE MAKES HIS LAIR AT NEBTHU.
NEBTHU?
THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE BLACK RING, A WORLD-WIDE GUILD OF EVIL MAGICIANS.
I HEARD OF IT FIRST WHEN I SOUGHT THE MIGHTY TALISMAN CALLED THE HEART OF AHRIMAN IN THIS SINISTER LAND, YEARS AGO.*
IS THIS NEBTHU WELL GUARDED, SIRE?
*IN CONAN THE CONQUEROR. -- R.T.
MITRA KNOWS! IT LAY CRUMBLING INTO RUINS, THE LAST I HEARD, BUT I DON'T--
FATHER-- LOOK!
IS THAT-- NEBTHU??

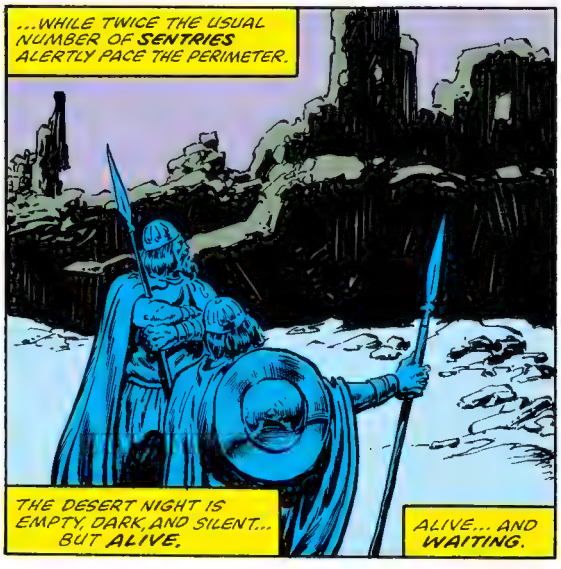

AYE, LAD! NEBTHU IT IS!
AND IT SEEMS A DEAD AND LIFELESS CITY, INDEED!
ONLY LEERING, CARVED GARGOYLES NOW CROUCH ATOP PYLONS WHICH ALONE REMAIN OF THE HUGE WALLS, NOW FALLEN, WHICH ONCE ENCIRCLED THE CITY.
AS THE ARMY MAKES CAMP NEAR THE RUINS, NOTHING MOVES WITHIN...SAVE THE SCUTTLING SCORPION, THE GLIDING SAND-VIPER...
...OR PERHAPS THE WANDERING GHOSTS OF LONG-BURIED STYGIAN KINGS.

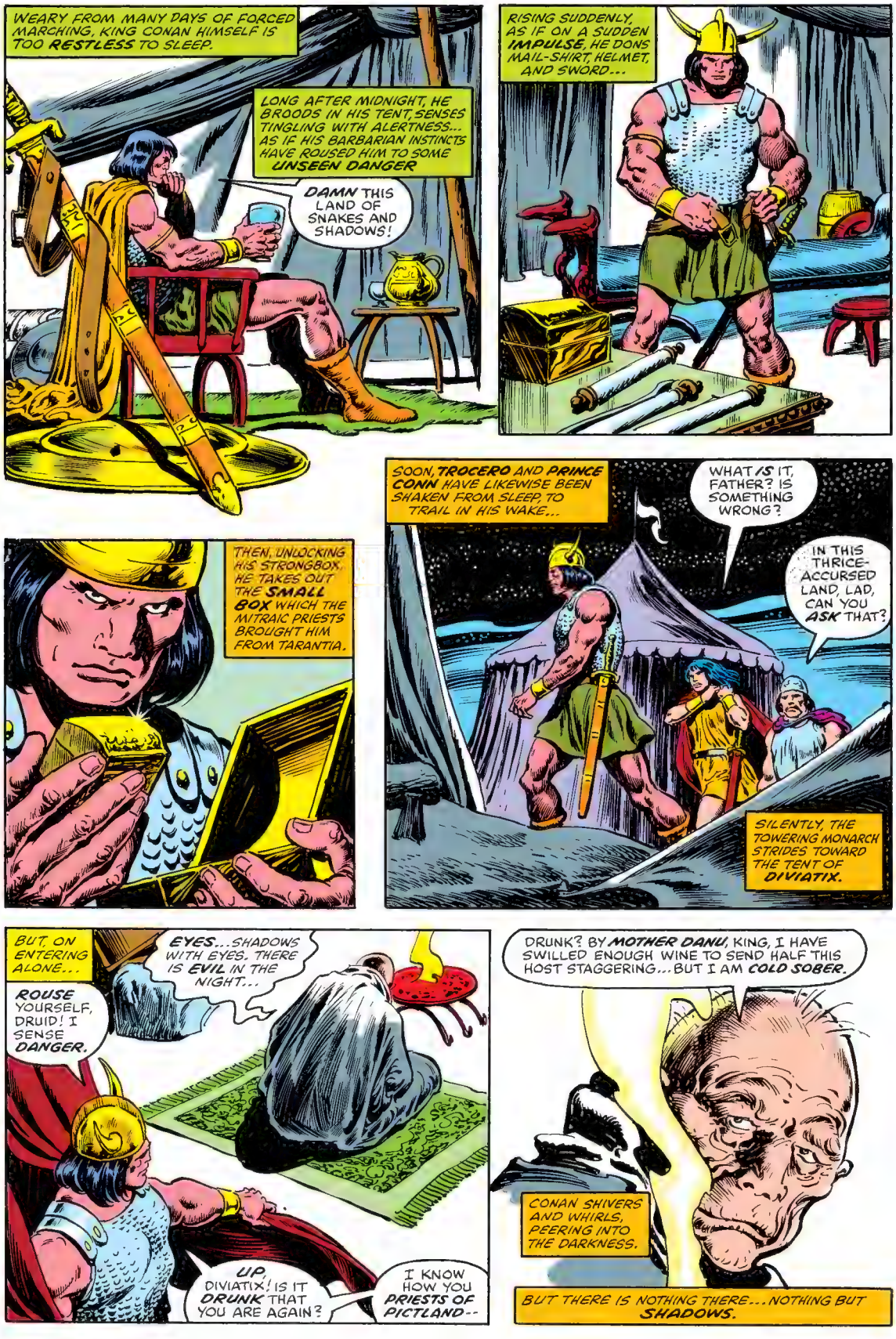

LATER, WHEN SCOUTS HAVE REPORTED BACK THAT NO AMBUSH WAITS IN THE SAND-DRIFTED STREETS, CONAN LEAVES BEHIND THE COOKING-FIRES OF THE CAMP TO LEAD A TRIO OF STALWARTS INTO THE RUINED CITY...
COME, CONN... DIVIATIX... TROCERO!
I KNOW MY WARRIORS WON'T SLEEP EASILY IN SUCH A MAGIC-CURSED PLACE, SO I'LL LEAVE THEM OUTSIDE FOR THE TIME BEING.
FOR MYSELF, HOWEVER, I WOULD SEE THAT WHICH THE SCOUTS HAVE REPORTED.
JUST TRY LEAVING ME BEHIND, FATHER!
I DON'T FEAR ANY OLD SUPER-STITIONS.
YOUR SIRE KNOWS, LAD, THAT SORCEROUS INFLUENCES OFTEN LINGER ABOUT ANY ANCIENT RUIN...
...AND NOWHERE IS THAT TRUER THAN AGE-ACCURSED STYGIA!
ACCORDING TO THE SCOUTS, SIRE, THE GIGANTIC IDOL, OR MONUMENT, OR WHATEVER, SHOULD BE RIGHT PAST YONDER CRUMPLED PILLARS.
THERE IT IS, LORD OF AQUILONIA.
LET ME--!
STAY BACK, CONN, TILL I HAVE--
CROM, MITRA, AND VARUNA!


LIKE SOME PRIMAL MONSTER THE GREAT STONE STATUE CROUCHES AMID THE WASTE...
I-- I THOUGHT THE BLACK MAGICIANS OF THIS HELLISH LAND ALL WORSHIPPED SET, THE OLD SERPENT.
WHAT PIT-SPAWNED DEVIL-THING IS THAT?
BY THE HORNS OF CERNUNNOS-- 'TIS THE GHOUL-HYENA OF CHAOS!
I'D NOT THOUGHT EVER TO SEE ITS LIKENESS WROUGHT BY HUMAN HANDS.

LET US BEGONE, DIVIATIX...
...LEST THAT BLACK SPHINX HAUNT OUR DREAMS TONIGHT.
BUT ALREADY, CONAN KNOWS HE SPEAKS... TOO LATE.


SOON, AS THE COALS OF SUNSET SMOLDER OUT, GLOOM ENSHROUDS THE SANDS OF STYGIA BENEATH THE MOONLESS SKY...
...AS A CURIOUSLY SUBDUED HOST EATS ITS RATIONS AND SLUMBER...

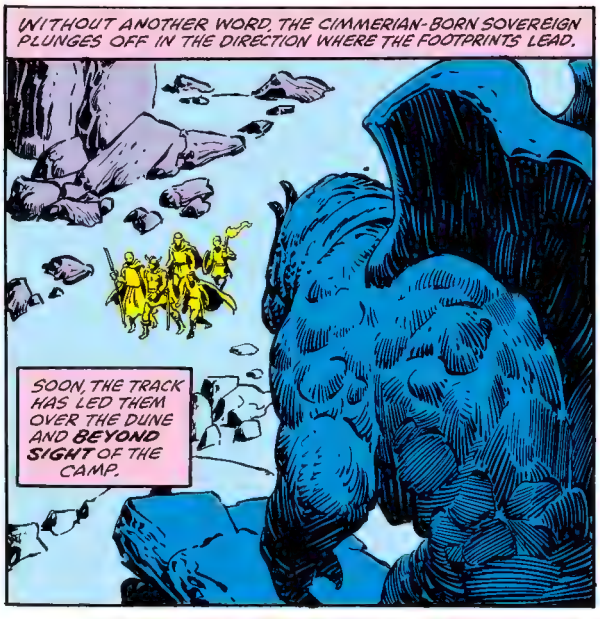

...WHILE TWICE THE USUAL NUMBER OF SENTRIES ALERTLY PACE THE PERIMETER.
THE DESERT NIGHT IS EMPTY, DARK, AND SILENT... BUT ALIVE.
ALIVE... AND WAITING.


WEARY FROM MANY DAYS OF FORCED MARCHING, KING CONAN HIMSELF IS TOO RESTLESS TO SLEEP.
LONG AFTER MIDNIGHT, HE BROODS IN HIS TENT, SENSES TINGLING WITH ALERTNESS... AS IF HIS BARBARIAN INSTINCTS HAVE ROUSED HIM TO SOME UNSEEN DANGER
DAMN THIS LAND OF SNAKES AND SHADOWS!
RISING SUDDENLY, AS IF ON A SUDDEN IMPULSE, HE DONS MAIL-SHIRT, HELMET, AND SWORD...
THEN, UNLOCKING HIS STRONGBOX, HE TAKES OUT THE SMALL BOX WHICH THE MITRAIC PRIESTS BROUGHT HIM FROM TARANTIA.
SOON, TROCERO AND PRINCE CONN HAVE LIKEWISE BEEN SHAKEN FROM SLEEP, TO TRAIL IN HIS WAKE...
WHAT IS IT, FATHER? IS SOMETHING WRONG?
IN THIS THRICE-ACCURSED LAND, LAD, CAN YOU ASK THAT?
SILENTLY, THE TOWERING MONARCH STRIDES TOWARD THE TENT OF DIVIATIX.
BUT, ON ENTERING ALONE...
EYES... SHADOWS WITH EYES. THERE IS EVIL IN THE NIGHT...
ROUSE YOURSELF, DRUID! I SENSE DANGER.
UP, DIVIATIX! IS IT DRUNK THAT YOU ARE AGAIN?
I KNOW HOW YOU PRIESTS OF PICTLAND--
DRUNK? BY MOTHER DANU, KING, I HAVE SWILLED ENOUGH WINE TO SEND HALF THIS HOST STAGGERING... BUT I AM COLD SOBER.
CONAN SHIVERS AND WHIRLS, PEERING INTO THE DARKNESS.
BUT THERE IS NOTHING THERE... NOTHING BUT SHADOWS.

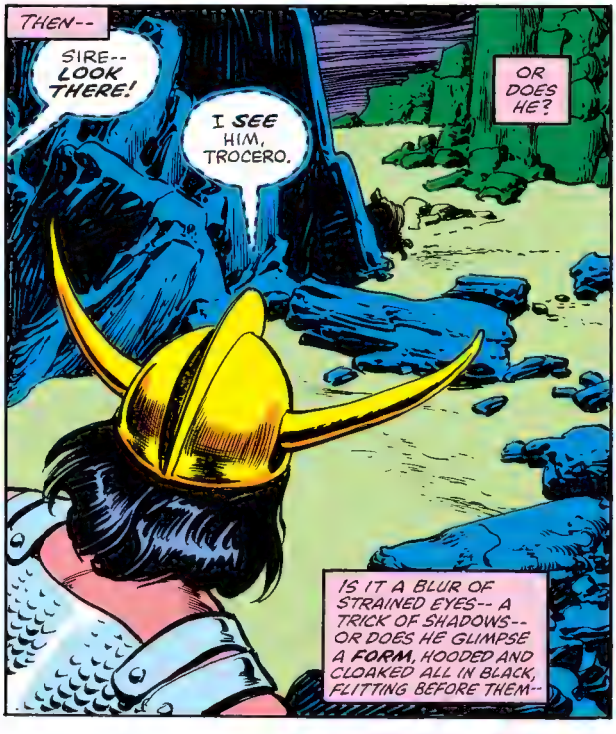
OUTSIDE IN THE DIM, STAR-FILLED NIGHT, PALLANTIDES HAS JOINED THE WAITING THREESOME...
WHAT IS IT, SIRE?
I KNOW NOT... BUT SOME-THING.
CROM CURSE IT, I CAN'T PUT A NAME TO IT, BUT SOMETHING'S WRONG.
SHALL WE ROUSE THE HOST, SIRE?
NOT YET. LET THE MEN GET WHAT SLEEP THEY MAY, EXCEPT...
PALLANTIDES, LEND ME TWO STOUT MEN-AT-ARMS WHO FEAR NEITHER GOD, MAN, NOR DEVIL!
WITHIN MINUTES, A PAIR OF YAWNING GUNDERMEN APPROACH WITH A CLINK OF MAIL...
YOU'LL DO. COME!
STRIDING DOWN THE SANDY LANE BETWEEN ROWS OF TENTS AND OUT TOWARD THE EDGE OF THE ENCAMPMENT, THE GROUP ENCOUNTER AMRIC THE BULL...
HO, MY BRAVE KOTHIAN! HAVE YOU SEEN ANYTHING AMISS?
NOTHING AT ALL, LORD KING, THOUGH WE'VE HEARD THE FAR-OFF YAPPING OF JACKALS.
ALSO, A FEW OF THE SENTRIES COMPLAIN OF... WELL, SHADOWS! SHADOWS THAT WATCH THEM.
SHADOWS WITH EYES! THEN MY VISION WAS TRUE!
SHADOWS, EH? THEY'LL BE STARTING AT MICE NEXT.
WELL, THESE LORDS AND I WILL SEE IF WE CAN FIND YOUR PROWLING SENTRIES, AMRIC.
YOU MAY GO.
AND NOT LONG AFTER...
FOOTPRINTS! IT SEEMS WE HAVE A SPY AFTER ALL!
FATHER-- THERE!
FOR NEVER YET HAVE I HEARD TELL OF SHADOWS THAT LEAVE FOOTPRINTS IN SOFT SAND.
SIRE, SHALL I SOUND THE HORN?

FOR ONE SKULKING SPY? NONSENSE, MAN?
WE'LL TRACK THE ROGUE TO HIS LAIR OURSELVES.
ONE OF YOU GUNDERMEN--GO TELL PALLANTIDES WHERE WE'VE GONE, AND BID HIM SEND SOME MEN ON OUR TRACK!
BUT TELL HIM THAT THEY SHALL NOT COME UP WITH US, UNLESS WE GET INTO TROUBLE.

I HOPE TO CATCH THE SLINKER UNAWARES... AND THEIR CLATTER WOULD ALERT HIM A LEAGUE AWAY.
TIME ENOUGH TO SUMMON THE WATCH IF WE STUMBLE UPON A NEST OF THOTH-AMON'S SNAKE-WORSHIPPERS!

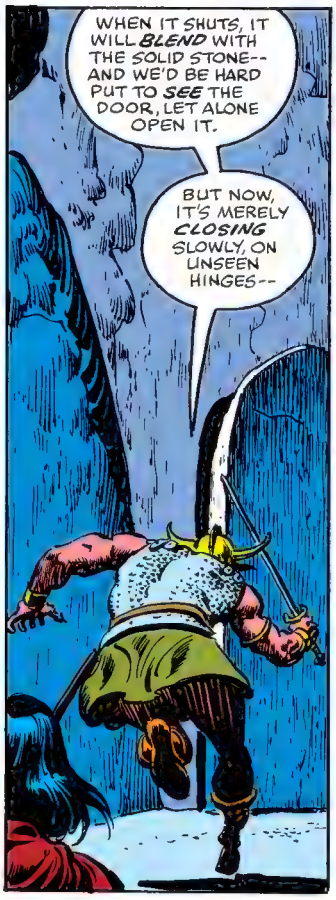

WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, THE CIMMERIAN-BORN SOVEREIGN PLUNGES OFF IN THE DIRECTION WHERE THE FOOTPRINTS LEAD.
SOON, THE TRACK HAS LED THEM OVER THE DUNE AND BEYOND SIGHT OF THE CAMP.

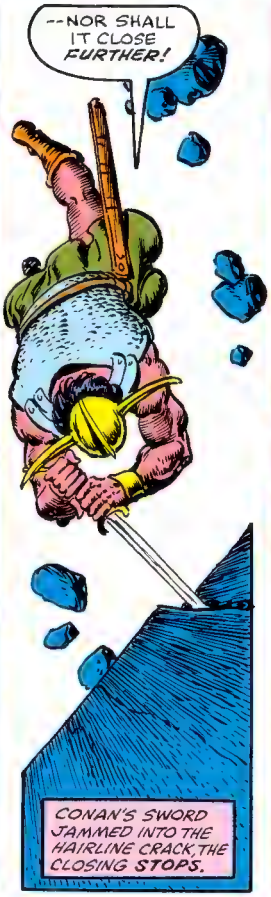
COUNT TROCERO FEARS THE LONG MARCH WITHOUT OPPOSITION HAS MADE HIS MONARCH BOTH REST-LESS AND RECKLESS...
BUT, WHO CAN ARGUE WITH KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA?

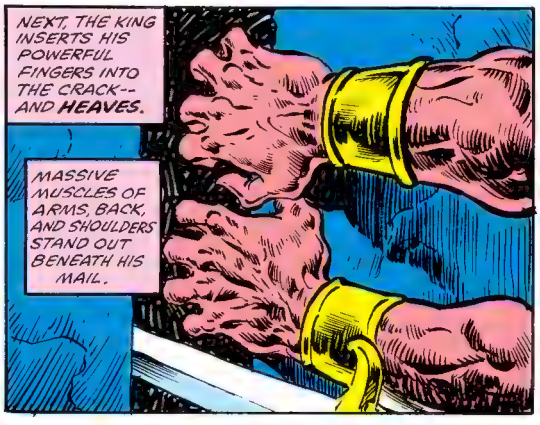

THEN--
SIRE-- LOOK THERE!
I SEE HIM, TROCERO.
OR DOES HE?
IS IT A BLUR OF STRAINED EYES-- A TRICK OF SHADOWS-- OR DOES HE GLIMPSE A FORM, HOODED AND CLOAKED ALL IN BLACK, FLITTING BEFORE THEM--

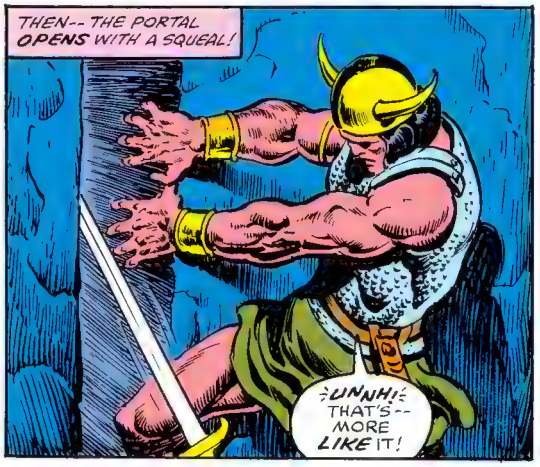
--MOVING OMINOUSLY TOWARD THE TOWERING BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU?
BETWEEN THE STONE MONSTER'S OUTSTRETCHED PAWS THE FIGURE RACES.

AND THEN, IT MERGES WITH THE BASALT, AND--
FATHER! IT VANISHED AGAINST THE BREAST OF THE IDOL!
YOU MUST SHARPEN YOUR EYESIGHT, LAD.
DON'T YOU SEE? THERE'S A DOORWAY, THREE MEN HIGH, IN THE MONSTER'S CHEST!

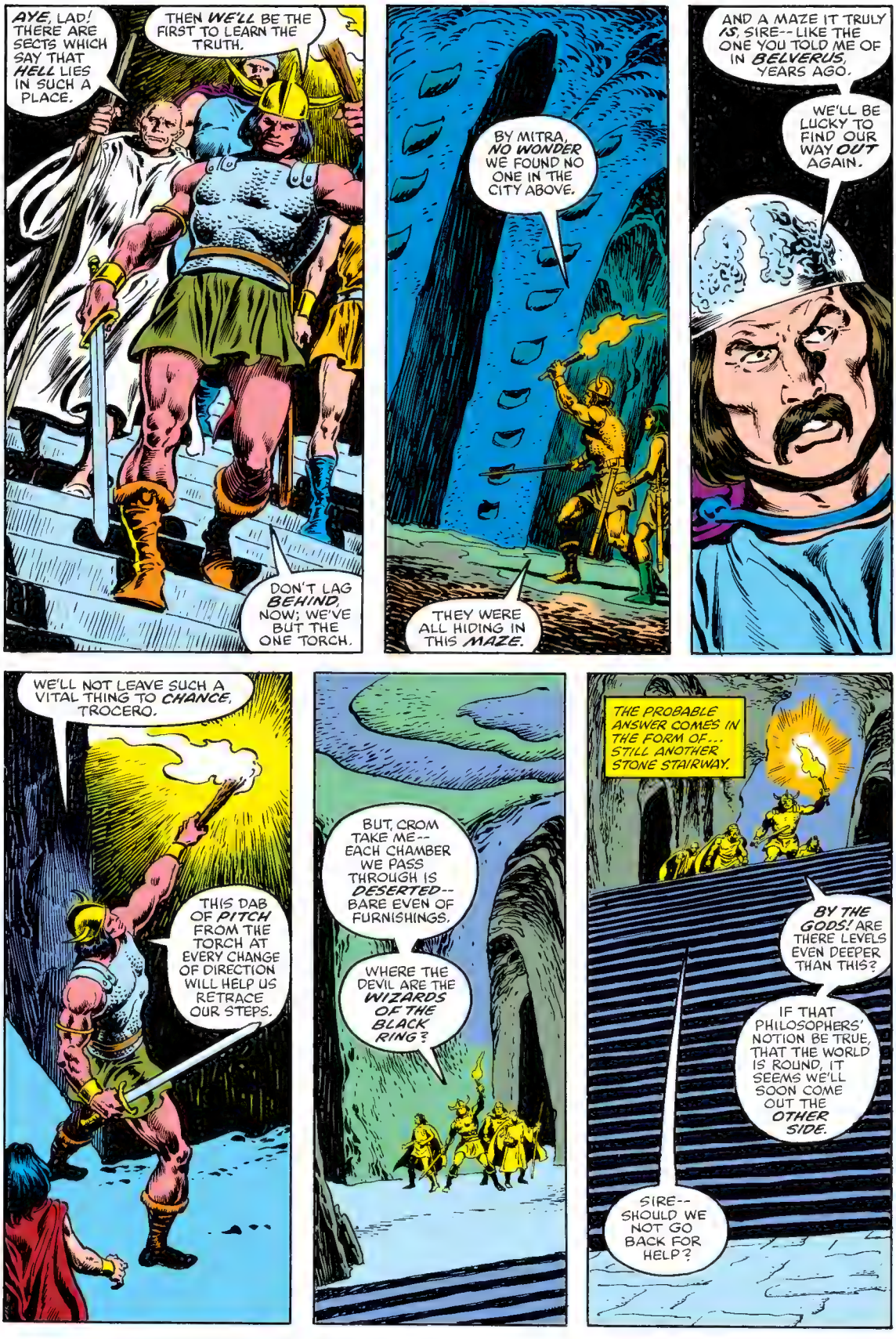

WHEN IT SHUTS, IT WILL BLEND WITH THE SOLID STONE--AND WE'D BE HARD PUT TO SEE THE DOOR, LET ALONE OPEN IT.
BUT NOW, IT'S MERELY CLOSING SLOWLY, ON UNSEEN HINGES--


--NOR SHALL IT CLOSE FURTHER!
CONAN'S SWORD JAMMED INTO THE HAIRLINE CRACK, THE CLOSING STOPS.


NEXT, THE KING INSERTS HIS POWERFUL FINGERS INTO THE CRACK--AND HEAVES.
MASSIVE MUSCLES OF ARMS, BACK, AND SHOULDERS STAND OUT BENEATH HIS MAIL.

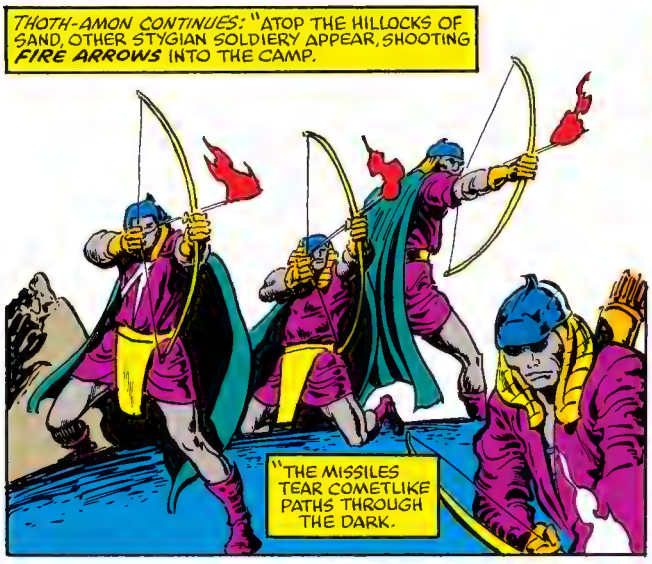

THEN-- THE PORTAL OPENS WITH A SQUEAL!
:UNNH!: THAT'S--MORE LIKE IT!

NOW-- IF ONLY I CAN HOLD THE STONE DOOR--TILL EITHER ITS HINGES GIVE--
--OR ELSE-- IT CRUSHES ME-- TO A CRIMSON PULP--!
SIRE! THE PORTAL HAS CEASED ITS GRINDING!
BUT, HOW DID YOU KNOW IT OPERATED ON SOME SORT OF MECHANISM THAT WOULD BREAK WHEN STRONGLY ENOUGH RESISTED?
I DIDN'T.
NOW COME...
YOU, GUNDERMAN-- THORUS, ISN'T IT?-- PLANT YOUR PIKE TO HOLD THE DOOR OPEN, THEN RUN BACK TO CAMP!
TELL PALLANTIDES TO SEND A WHOLE COMPANY AFTER US!...
WE'LL NEED THEM!
YES, YOUR MAJESTY.
WITHIN THE SPHINX, THE FOUR STALWARTS FOLLOW A HIGH, WIDE CORRIDOR OF SOLID STONE... WARY EVERY PASSING INSTANT OF TRAPS AND PITFALLS.
DIVIATIX... YOU HESITATED BEFORE ENTERING THE SPHINX. WHY?
THE OLD SUPERSTITIONS DIE HARD, KING--EVEN IN ONE WHO OFT HAS GLIMPSED THE NAKED SOURCE OF LEGENDS.
FOR UNTOLD AGES, IT HAS BEEN FORBIDDEN TO CARVE THE LIKENESS OF THE GHOUL-HYENA, YET THOTH-AMON AND HIS BLACK RING HAVE--
HOLD, DRUID! WATCH YOUR STEP, ALL!
FROM HERE, A BROAD STONE STAIRWAY DESCENDS.
LEADING-- BENEATH THE DESERT SANDS, FATHER?


AYE, LAD! THERE ARE SECTS WHICH SAY THAT HELL LIES IN SUCH A PLACE.
THEN WE'LL BE THE FIRST TO LEARN THE TRUTH.
DON'T LAG BEHIND, NOW; WE'VE BUT THE ONE TORCH.
BY MITRA, NO WONDER WE FOUND NO ONE IN THE CITY ABOVE.
THEY WERE ALL HIDING IN THIS MAZE.
AND A MAZE IT TRULY IS, SIRE--LIKE THE ONE YOU TOLD ME OF IN BELVERUS, YEARS AGO.
WE'LL BE LUCKY TO FIND OUR WAY OUT AGAIN.
WE'LL NOT LEAVE SUCH A VITAL THING TO CHANCE, TROCERO.
THIS DAB OF PITCH FROM THE TORCH AT EVERY CHANGE OF DIRECTION WILL HELP US RETRACE OUR STEPS.
BUT, CROM TAKE ME--EACH CHAMBER WE PASS THROUGH IS DESERTED--BARE EVEN OF FURNISHINGS.
WHERE THE DEVIL ARE THE WIZARDS OF THE BLACK RING?
THE PROBABLE ANSWER COMES IN THE FORM OF... STILL ANOTHER STONE STAIRWAY.
BY THE GODS! ARE THERE LEVELS EVEN DEEPER THAN THIS?
IF THAT PHILOSOPHERS' NOTION BE TRUE, THAT THE WORLD IS ROUND, IT SEEMS WE'LL SOON COME OUT THE OTHER SIDE.
SIRE--SHOULD WE NOT GO BACK FOR HELP?

NAY, THE LADS SHOULD BE JOINING US SOON... AND THUS FAR WE'VE FOUND NAUGHT TO BEWARE OF.
HAH! WE'RE ENTERING A CHAMBER HUGE AS AN ARENA, NOT UNLIKE THE GREAT HIPPODROME OF TARANTIA.
SAVE THAT OURS IS OUT IN THE CLEAN OPEN AIR!
STONE BENCHES, TOO... FAR AS I CAN SEE!
I WONDER WHAT THEY USE THIS PLACE FOR.
WE USE IT--TO DISPOSE OF OUR ENEMIES!
WHAT IN MITRA'S NAME--?
EVEN AS CONAN WHIRLS, COLD ARTIFICIAL LIGHT FLARES UP, FILLING THE VAST AREA WITH AN UNCANNY AND SOURCELESS ILLUMINATION.
BY THIS GLOW, THE CIMMERIAN CAN SEE THAT THE FARTHER STONE BENCHES ARE OCCUPIED BY HUNDREDS OF HUMAN FIGURES, ROBED AND COWLED IN BLACK.
AND, DIRECTLY BEFORE THEM, ENTHRONED IN A GREAT CHAIR OF BLACK STONE ABOVE THE LOWER ROWS OF MAGICIANS, SITS A TALL, STRONGLY-BUILT FIGURE WITH THE DARK EYES AND HAWKLIKE FEATURES OF A PURE-BLOODED STYGIAN.
WELCOME TO MY EMPIRE, CONAN OF AQUILONIA!
THOTH-AMON!

CHAPTER II
THE BLACK BEAST SLAYS!
YOU'VE TAKEN IMMENSE PAINS TO TRAP ME, STYGIAN-- BUT THIS WOLF HAS PACK-BROTHERS WHO'LL SOON FREE ME FROM YOUR SNARE!
IF YOU MEAN YOUR GENERAL PALLANTIDES AND HIS MEN, BARBARIAN, YOU WILL WAIT UNTIL YOUR NORTHERN GOD YMIR'S ICE-PALACE MELTS FOR THEM.
THOUGH THE FIRST GUNDERMAN YOU SENT BACK REACHED YOUR CAMP, THE SECOND LIES A BARE HUNDRED PACES FROM THE SPHINX OF NEBTHU... A STYGIAN ARROW THROUGH HIS NECK.
AS FOR YOUR VAUNTED AQUILONIANS, THEY HAVE THEIR OWN PROBLEMS.
A FEW SHORT MINUTES AGO, THEY DISCOVERED THAT THE TROOPS LEVIED FROM KOTH AND OPHIR HAD DESERTED-- TAKING ALL THEIR MOUNTS.
AND, MERE MOMENTS SINCE, THE SOMBER DUNES ALL ABOUT THE CAMP SUDDENLY BEGAN TO ERUPT MEN-- SWORDSMEN AND ARCHERS ON HORSE AND CAMEL.
ALL BY MY PRE-ARRANGED MYSTIC SIGNAL, OF COURSE; I LEAVE NAUGHT TO THAT SHE-CUR GODDESS CHANCE.

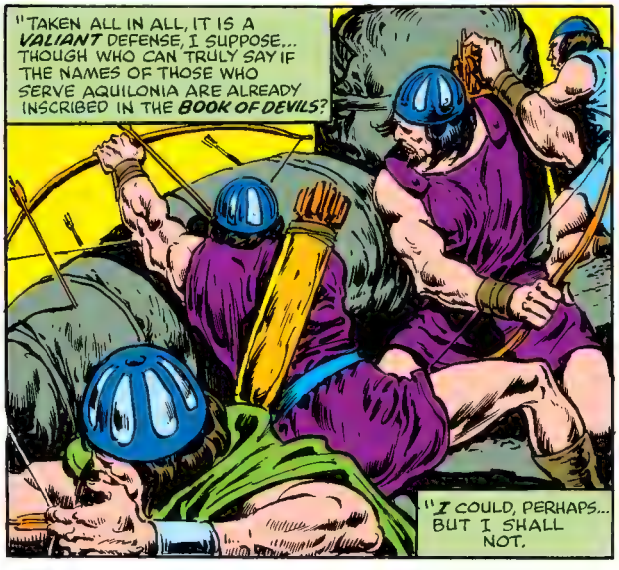

THOTH-AMON CONTINUES: "ATOP THE HILLOCKS OF SAND, OTHER STYGIAN SOLDIERY APPEAR, SHOOTING FIRE ARROWS INTO THE CAMP.
"THE MISSILES TEAR COMETLIKE PATHS THROUGH THE DARK.

"FIRST ONE TENT, THEN ANOTHER BLAZES UP.

"YOUR GENERAL PALLANTIDES, NATURALLY, STRIVES TO RALLY YOUR STARTLED, CONFUSED FORCES...
STRIKE THE TENTS! PUT OUT THE FIRES!
CENWULF! WHERE IN HELL ARE YOU?
HERE, MY GENERAL! WHERE IS THE KING?
MITRA ONLY KNOWS! HE WENT OFF INTO THE DESERT, TRACKING A SPY.

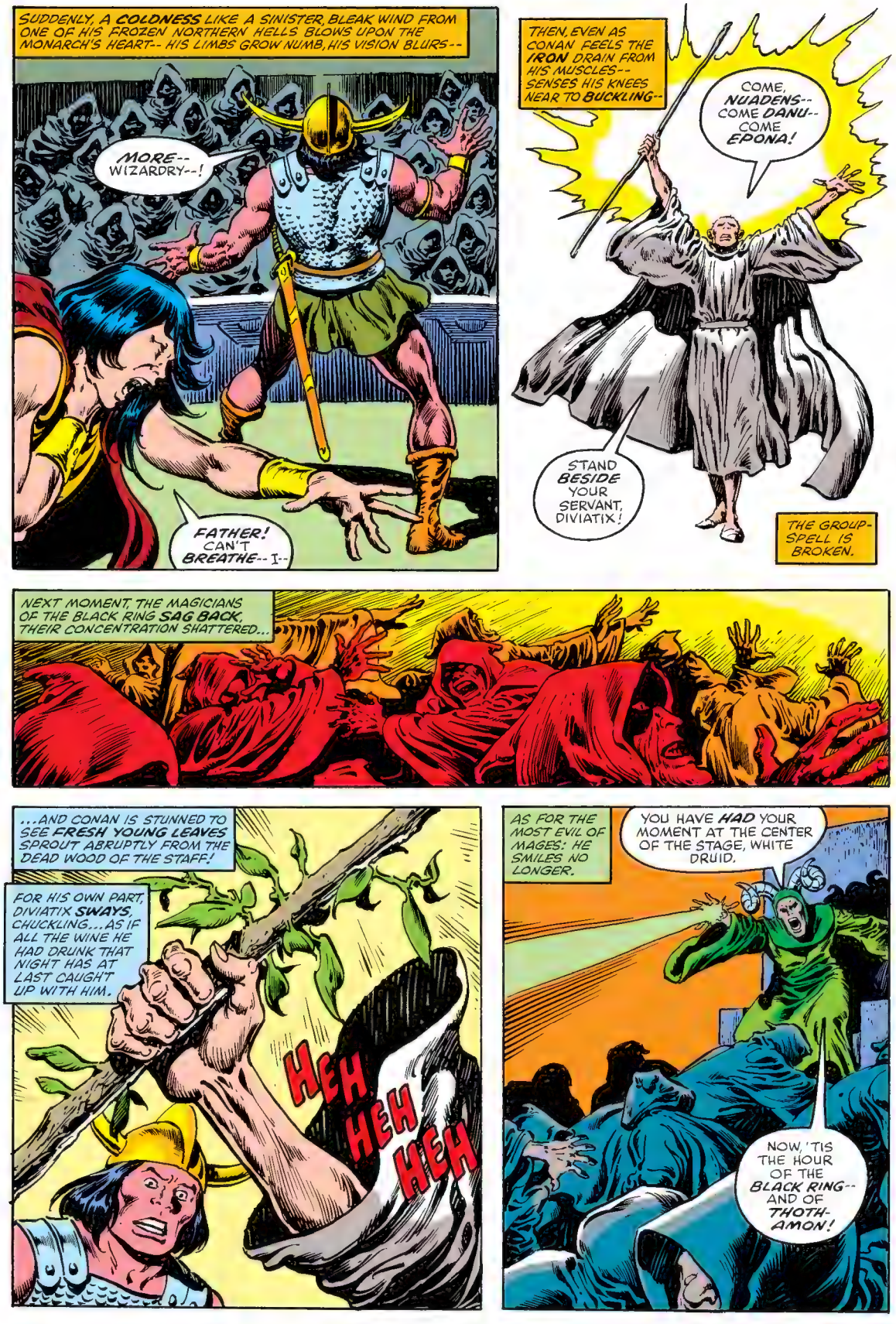
SPREAD YOUR MEN AROUND THE PERIMETER AND PICK OFF SOME OF THOSE FLITTING BLACK-CLOAKS!
DETAIL A SQUAD TO BEAT DOWN THOSE DEVILS ON THE DUNE, WITH THE FIRE ARROWS!
YES, MY GENERAL.

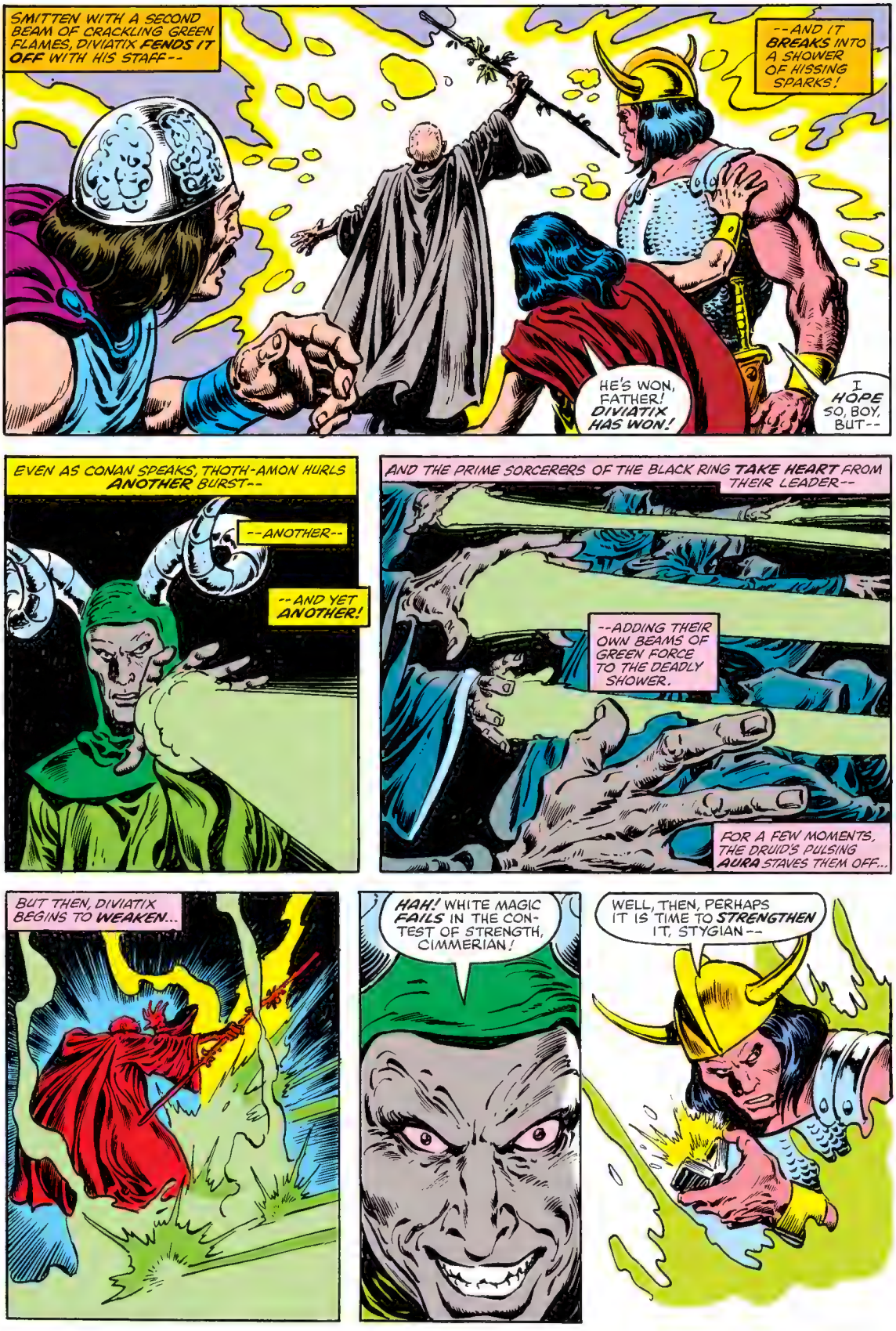
AMRIC!
SPREAD THE MEN AROUND IN A CIRCLE OUTSIDE THE BOSSONIAN ARCHERS, KNEELING WITH PIKES READY TO STOP A CHARGE!
HERE, SIRE!
PILE BAGGAGE BEFORE THEM, AND HEAP SAND UPON IT FOR A BREASTWORK..!

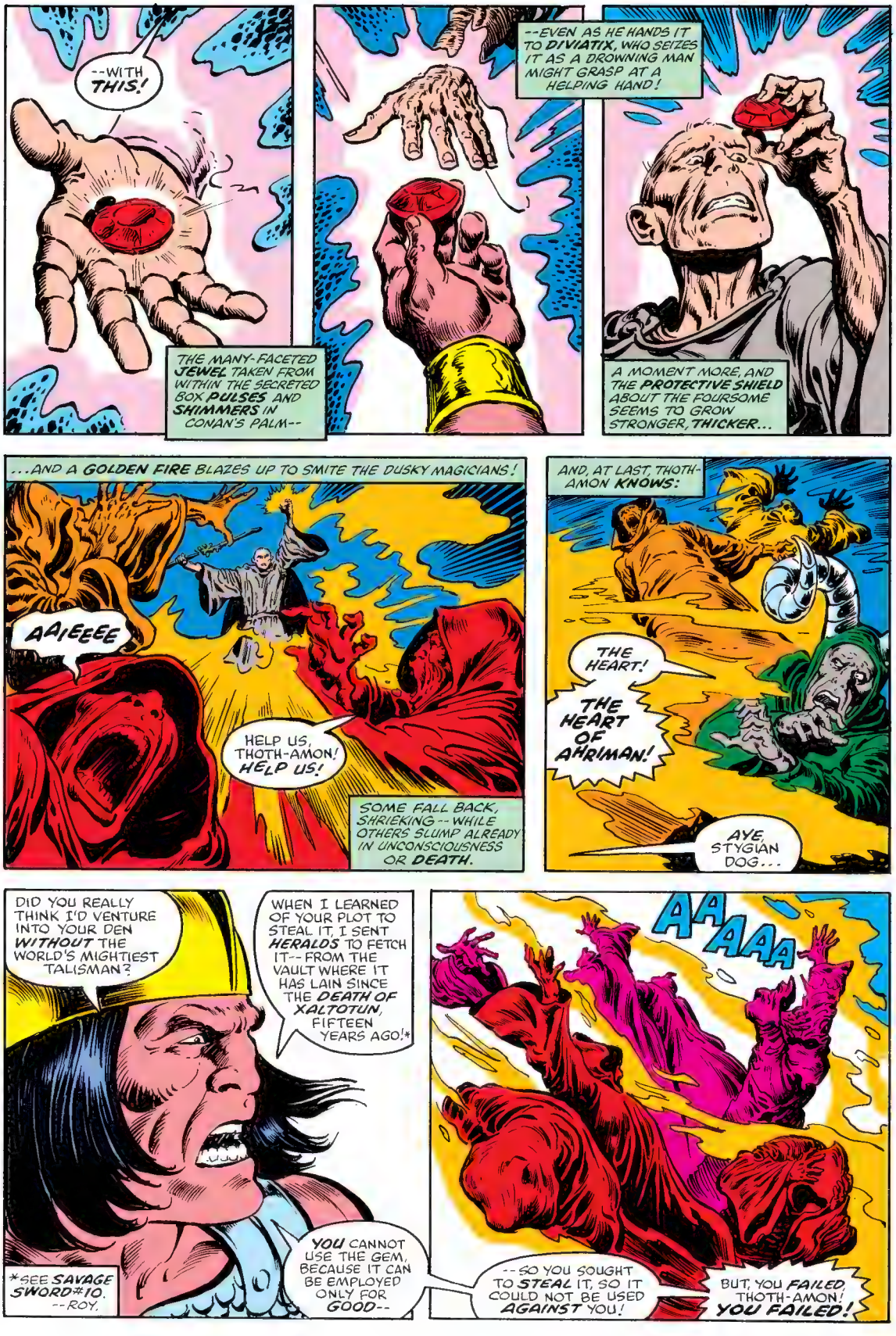

"TAKEN ALL IN ALL, IT IS A VALIANT DEFENSE, I SUPPOSE... THOUGH WHO CAN TRULY SAY IF THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO SERVE AQUILONIA ARE ALREADY INSCRIBED IN THE BOOK OF DEVILS?
"I COULD, PERHAPS... BUT I SHALL NOT.

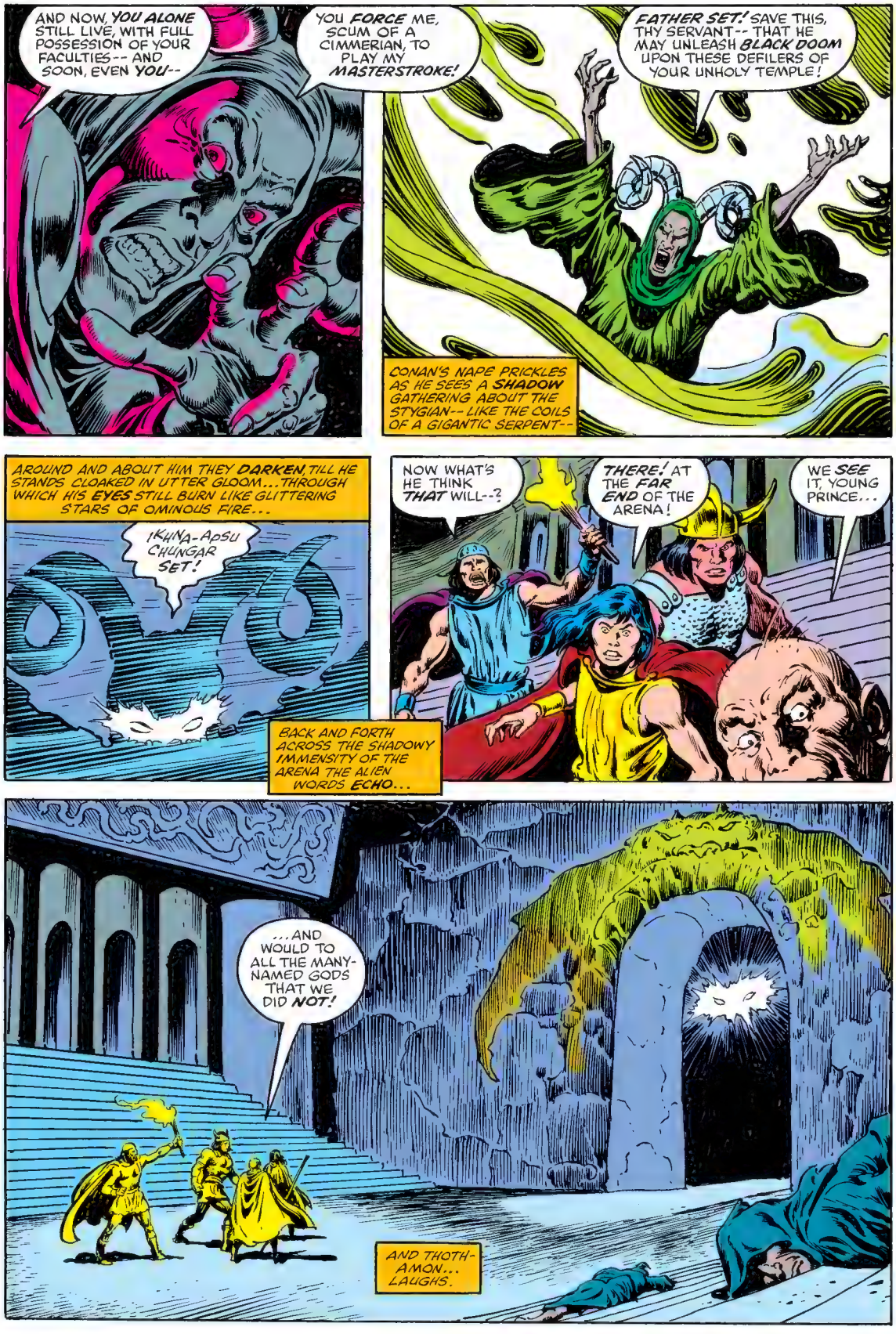
FOR TOO LONG, CIMMERIAN, HAVE YOU STOOD IN MY PATH!
I SAW YOU VENTURE INTO THE SOUTHERN LANDS FROM YOUR FROZEN NORTH, SOME FORTY YEARS AGO.
I SHOULD HAVE CRUSHED YOU THEN, WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG AND WEAK.
HAD I BUT KNOWN HOW YOUR POWER WOULD GROW, I WOULD HAVE STRUCK YOU DOWN WITH A BLAST OF MAGIC--THAT FIRST TIME, WHEN YOU MEDDLED IN MY AFFAIRS IN THE HOUSE OF KALLIAN IN NEMEDIA...
...OR AGAIN, WHEN YOU SPOILED MY SCHEMES TO WREST THE THRONE OF ZINGARA FROM KING FERDRUGO'S FEEBLE GRASP.
GO ON, STYGIAN.
CROM KNOWS, YOU'VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH TO MAKE THIS SPEECH.
SO I HAVE, BARBARIAN... SO I HAVE.
THERE WERE OTHER OPPORTUNITIES, AS WELL... FOR INSTANCE, WHEN I FIRST GLIMPSED YOU IN COUNT VALENSO'S STRONGHOLD ON THE WESTERN OCEAN...
...OR EVEN IN YOUR EARLIER YEARS OF KINGING IT IN AQUILONIA, WHEN I WAS ASCALANTE'S SLAVE IN TARANTIA.
THESE LAPSES, HOWEVER, SHALL NOW BE CORRECTED.
I FEAR YOUR SLINKING SERPENTS LITTLE, YOU STYGIAN SWINE!
WELL SAID, DOG OF A NORTHLANDER SAVAGE!
I ADMIRE YOUR COOLNESS AS MUCH AS MY FELLOW SORCERERS DEPLORE YOUR EFFRONTERY.
YOU WASTE WORDS, THOTH-AMON.
DESPITE YOUR SURPRISE ATTACK, I SUSPECT MY WARRIORS ABOVE ARE REAPING A RED HARVEST.
AH, BUT I DO NOT FIGHT WITH SWORDS ALONE, CONAN OF AQUILONIA...
...BUT WITH SORCERY AS WELL!

LANCING ACROSS THE ARENA, THE BOLT OF EMERALD STRIKES TROCERO'S NAKED BLADE...
MOTHER OF MITRA!
...SO THAT IT GLOWS RED, AND FALLS SMOKING FROM THE POITAINIAN'S HAND!
AND HE CAN BUT PUT HIS BLISTERED FINGERS IN HIS MOUTH, TO SOOTHE HIS PAIN.
AH YES-- SORCERY! I'VE ALWAYS LOATHED IT... STILL DO.
BUT SOMETIMES, THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT SORCERY...
...IS WITH SORCERY.
STEP FORWARD, HOLY FATHER...!
THE BLACK MAGICIANS ABOVE RECOIL, HISSING...
IT IS A WHITE DRUID OF PICTLAND!
IT IS INDEED.
UNLESS MY SENSES DECEIVE ME, IT IS NONE OTHER THAN DIVIATIX.
"DIVIATIX!" THE CRY ARISES FROM A HUNDRED THROATS; YET, AT A SIGNAL FROM THE PRINCE OF SORCERERS, THEY FALL SILENT.
THE PRESSURE OF SCORES OF EYES POUR DOWN UPON KING CONAN AND HIS TRIO OF COMPANIONS.
THE SILENT, CONCENTRATED POWER OF THOSE BLACK, GLITTERING EYES IS UNNERVING.

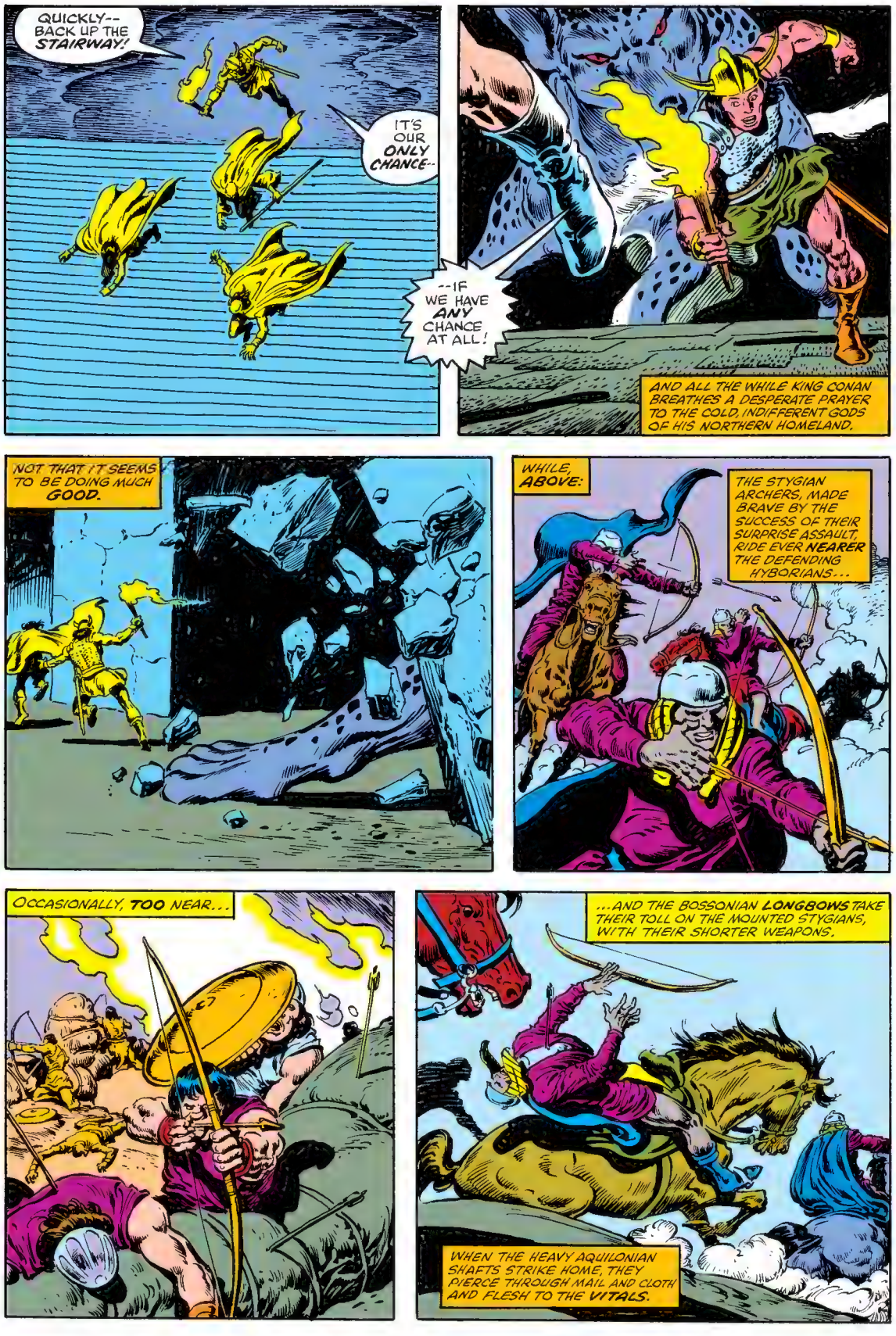

SUDDENLY, A COLDNESS LIKE A SINISTER, BLEAK WIND FROM ONE OF HIS FROZEN NORTHERN HELLS BLOWS UPON THE MONARCH'S HEART-- HIS LIMBS GROW NUMB, HIS VISION BLURS--
MORE-- WIZARDRY--!
FATHER! CAN'T BREATHE-- I--
THEN, EVEN AS CONAN FEELS THE IRON DRAIN FROM HIS MUSCLES-- SENSES HIS KNEES NEAR TO BUCKLING--
COME, NUADENS-- COME DANU-- COME EPONA!
STAND BESIDE YOUR SERVANT, DIVIATIX!
THE GROUP-SPELL IS BROKEN.
NEXT MOMENT, THE MAGICIANS OF THE BLACK RING SAG BACK, THEIR CONCENTRATION SHATTERED...
...AND CONAN IS STUNNED TO SEE FRESH YOUNG LEAVES SPROUT ABRUPTLY FROM THE DEAD WOOD OF THE STAFF!
FOR HIS OWN PART, DIVIATIX SWAYS, CHUCKLING... AS IF ALL THE WINE HE HAD DRUNK THAT NIGHT HAS AT LAST CAUGHT UP WITH HIM.
HEH HEH HEH
AS FOR THE MOST EVIL OF MAGES: HE SMILES NO LONGER.
YOU HAVE HAD YOUR MOMENT AT THE CENTER OF THE STAGE, WHITE DRUID.
NOW, 'TIS THE HOUR OF THE BLACK RING-- AND OF THOTH-AMON!

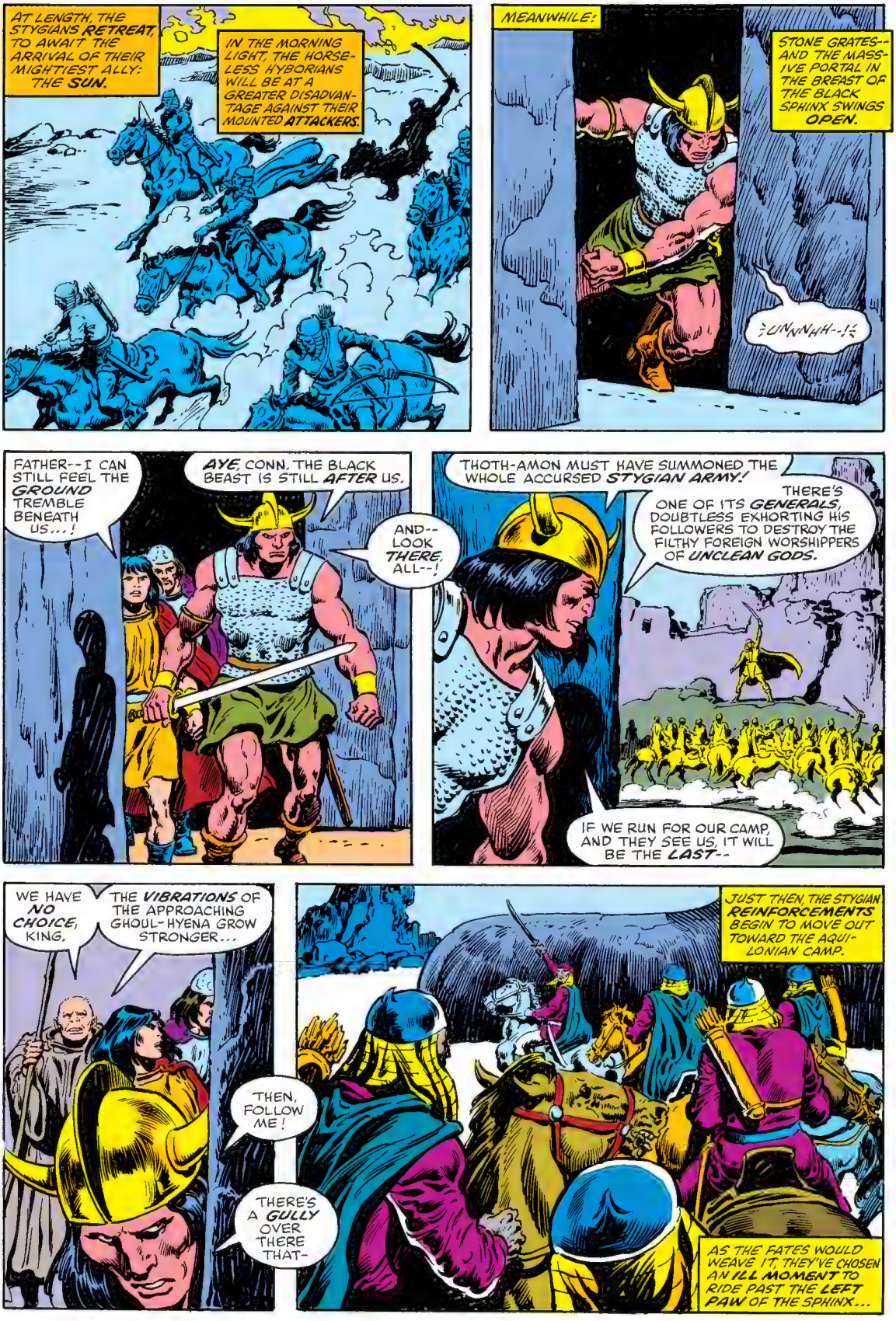

SMITTEN WITH A SECOND BEAM OF CRACKLING GREEN FLAMES, DIVIATIX FENDS IT OFF WITH HIS STAFF--
--AND IT BREAKS INTO A SHOWER OF HISSING SPARKS!
HE'S WON, FATHER! DIVIATIX HAS WON!
I HOPE SO, BOY, BUT--
EVEN AS CONAN SPEAKS, THOTH-AMON HURLS ANOTHER BURST--
--ANOTHER--
--AND YET ANOTHER!
AND THE PRIME SORCERERS OF THE BLACK RING TAKE HEART FROM THEIR LEADER--
--ADDING THEIR OWN BEAMS OF GREEN FORCE TO THE DEADLY SHOWER.
FOR A FEW MOMENTS, THE DRUID'S PULSING AURA STAVES THEM OFF...
BUT THEN, DIVIATIX BEGINS TO WEAKEN...
HAH! WHITE MAGIC FAILS IN THE CONTEST OF STRENGTH, CIMMERIAN!
WELL, THEN, PERHAPS IT IS TIME TO STRENGTHEN IT, STYGIAN--


--WITH THIS!
THE MANY-FACETED JEWEL TAKEN FROM WITHIN THE SECRETED BOX PULSES AND SHIMMERS IN CONAN'S PALM--
--EVEN AS HE HANDS IT TO DIVIATIX, WHO SEIZES IT AS A DROWNING MAN MIGHT GRASP AT A HELPING HAND!
A MOMENT MORE, AND THE PROTECTIVE SHIELD ABOUT THE FOURSOME SEEMS TO GROW STRONGER, THICKER...
...AND A GOLDEN FIRE BLAZES UP TO SMITE THE DUSKY MAGICIANS!
AAIEEEE
HELP US, THOTH-AMON! HELP US!
SOME FALL BACK, SHRIEKING -- WHILE OTHERS SLUMP ALREADY IN UNCONSCIOUSNESS OR DEATH.
AND, AT LAST, THOTH-AMON KNOWS:
THE HEART!
THE HEART OF AHRIMAN!
AYE, STYGIAN DOG...
DID YOU REALLY THINK I'D VENTURE INTO YOUR DEN WITHOUT THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST TALISMAN?
WHEN I LEARNED OF YOUR PLOT TO STEAL IT, I SENT HERALDS TO FETCH IT -- FROM THE VAULT WHERE IT HAS LAIN SINCE THE DEATH OF XALTOTUN, FIFTEEN YEARS AGO!*
*SEE SAVAGE SWORD #10. --ROY.
YOU CANNOT USE THE GEM, BECAUSE IT CAN BE EMPLOYED ONLY FOR GOOD--
AAAAA
--SO YOU SOUGHT TO STEAL IT, SO IT COULD NOT BE USED AGAINST YOU!
BUT, YOU FAILED, THOTH-AMON! YOU FAILED!


AND NOW, YOU ALONE STILL LIVE, WITH FULL POSSESSION OF YOUR FACULTIES -- AND SOON, EVEN YOU--
YOU FORCE ME, SCUM OF A CIMMERIAN, TO PLAY MY MASTERSTROKE!
FATHER SET! SAVE THIS, THY SERVANT -- THAT HE MAY UNLEASH BLACK DOOM UPON THESE DEFILERS OF YOUR UNHOLY TEMPLE!
CONAN'S NAPE PRICKLES AS HE SEES A SHADOW GATHERING ABOUT THE STYGIAN -- LIKE THE COILS OF A GIGANTIC SERPENT--
AROUND AND ABOUT HIM THEY DARKEN, TILL HE STANDS CLOAKED IN UTTER GLOOM...THROUGH WHICH HIS EYES STILL BURN LIKE GLITTERING STARS OF OMINOUS FIRE...
IKHNA-APSU CHUNGAR SET!
NOW WHAT'S HE THINK THAT WILL--?
THERE! AT THE FAR END OF THE ARENA!
WE SEE IT, YOUNG PRINCE...
BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE SHADOWY IMMENSITY OF THE ARENA THE ALIEN WORDS ECHO...
...AND WOULD TO ALL THE MANY-NAMED GODS THAT WE DID NOT!
AND THOTH-AMON... LAUGHS.

THEN, ITS OWN HELLISH LAUGHTER ECHOING THROUGH THE CHAMBER, IT SPRINGS FORTH FROM THE ABYSS OF DARKNESS...
HII
HII
NOR IS IT ANY INSUBSTANTIAL SHADOW, FOR THE EARTH TREMBLES BENEATH ITS PONDEROUS TREAD.
CROM!
EVEN THOTH-AMON HAS FLED THE COMING FORTH OF THE BEAST HIS PRAYERS HAVE ROUSED FROM ITS EONS OF SLUMBER.
TROCERO-- THE TORCH!
GODS, HELP US! IT IS THE LIVING PROTOTYPE OF THE BLACK SPHINX ABOVE!
DIVIATIX-- CAN'T YOU--?
NAY! NOT EVEN THE HEART OF AHRIMAN CAN GIVE ME POWER OVER THE BLACK BEAST-- THE VERY CHILD OF CHAOS ITSELF!
RUN, LAD-- RUN!
DAMN THIS VAST CHAMBER! IT MIGHT ALMOST HAVE BEEN HEWN FROM THE ROCK FOR THE MONSTER'S CONVENIENCE.
AND NONE OF THOSE PASSAGES YONDER ARE NARROW ENOUGH TO ELUDE THE THING.
HII
HII
HII
HII


QUICKLY-- BACK UP THE STAIRWAY!
IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE--
--IF WE HAVE ANY CHANCE AT ALL!
AND ALL THE WHILE KING CONAN BREATHES A DESPERATE PRAYER TO THE COLD, INDIFFERENT GODS OF HIS NORTHERN HOMELAND.
NOT THAT IT SEEMS TO BE DOING MUCH GOOD.
WHILE, ABOVE:
THE STYGIAN ARCHERS, MADE BRAVE BY THE SUCCESS OF THEIR SURPRISE ASSAULT, RIDE EVER NEARER THE DEFENDING HYBORIANS...
OCCASIONALLY, TOO NEAR...
...AND THE BOSSONIAN LONGBOWS TAKE THEIR TOLL ON THE MOUNTED STYGIANS, WITH THEIR SHORTER WEAPONS.
WHEN THE HEAVY AQUILONIAN SHAFTS STRIKE HOME, THEY PIERCE THROUGH MAIL AND CLOTH AND FLESH TO THE VITALS.

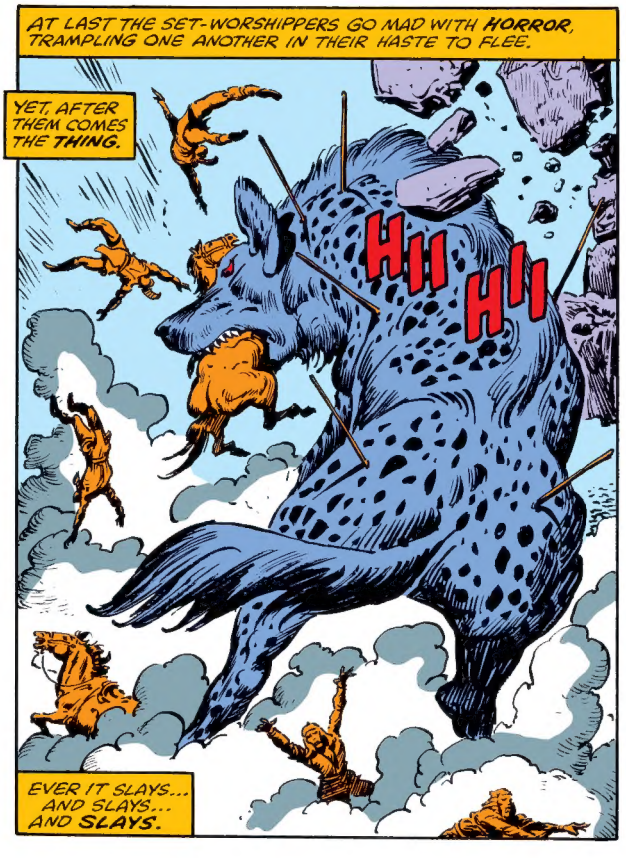

AT LENGTH, THE STYGIANS RETREAT, TO AWAIT THE ARRIVAL OF THEIR MIGHTIEST ALLY: THE SUN.
IN THE MORNING LIGHT, THE HORSELESS HYBORIANS WILL BE AT A GREATER DISADVANTAGE AGAINST THEIR MOUNTED ATTACKERS.
MEANWHILE:
STONE GRATES--AND THE MASSIVE PORTAL IN THE BREAST OF THE BLACK SPHINX SWINGS OPEN.
:UNNNHH--!:
FATHER--I CAN STILL FEEL THE GROUND TREMBLE BENEATH US...!
AYE, CONN, THE BLACK BEAST IS STILL AFTER US.
AND--LOOK THERE, ALL--!
THOTH-AMON MUST HAVE SUMMONED THE WHOLE ACCURSED STYGIAN ARMY!
THERE'S ONE OF ITS GENERALS, DOUBTLESS EXHORTING HIS FOLLOWERS TO DESTROY THE FILTHY FOREIGN WORSHIPPERS OF UNCLEAN GODS.
IF WE RUN FOR OUR CAMP, AND THEY SEE US, IT WILL BE THE LAST--
WE HAVE NO CHOICE, KING.
THE VIBRATIONS OF THE APPROACHING GHOUL-HYENA GROW STRONGER...
THEN, FOLLOW ME!
THERE'S A GULLY OVER THERE THAT-
JUST THEN, THE STYGIAN REINFORCEMENTS BEGIN TO MOVE OUT TOWARD THE AQUILONIAN CAMP.
AS THE FATES WOULD WEAVE IT, THEY'VE CHOSEN AN ILL MOMENT TO RIDE PAST THE LEFT PAW OF THE SPHINX...

FOR, AT THAT MOMENT, UNSEEN BY THE STYGIANS, ON THE FAR SIDE OF THAT STONE PAW--
HII HIII
HURRY! MAKE FOR THAT GULLY!
ALL HELL'S ABOUT TO BREAK LOOSE UP HERE!
AND, A FEW SECONDS LATER, AS THE DUSKY GENERAL PASSES THE FRONT OF THE IDOL--
--IT DOES!
O FATHER SET--
WHNIII
SSAAAAVE MEEEE!

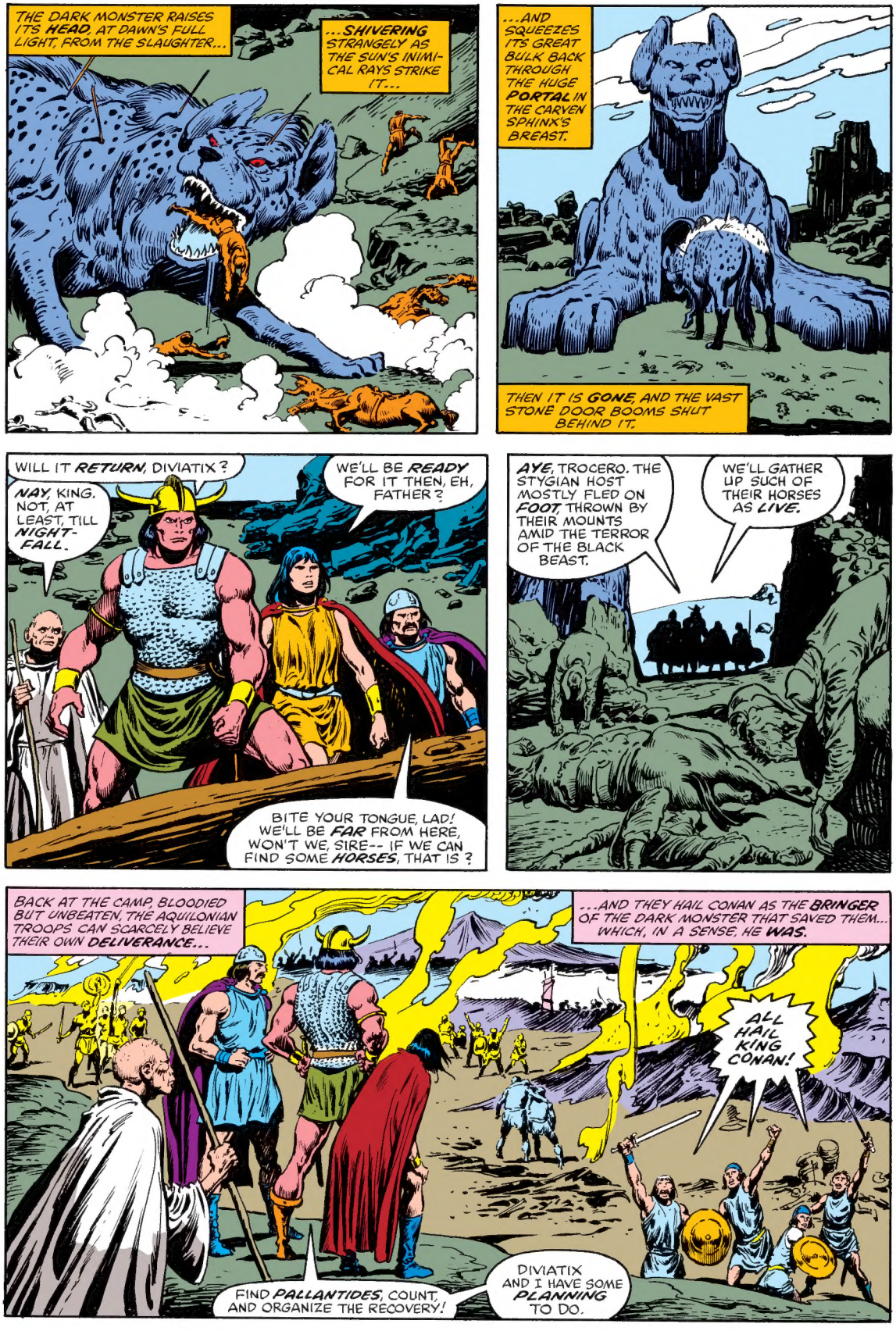
FLINGING ASIDE THE CRUSHED AND CRIMSON BODY OF THE GENERAL, THE GREAT GHOUL-HYENA TURNS, TO TOWER FOR AN INSTANT OVER THE STYGIAN HOST-- LOOKING FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE THE LIVING CUB OF THE STONE CREATURE IT RESEMBLES.
THEN, IT IS AMONG THEM--
HII HII HII
--AND THE AIR IS HIDEOUS WITH THE SHRIEKING OF MANGLED HORSES, THE AGONY AND TERROR OF BROKEN MEN.

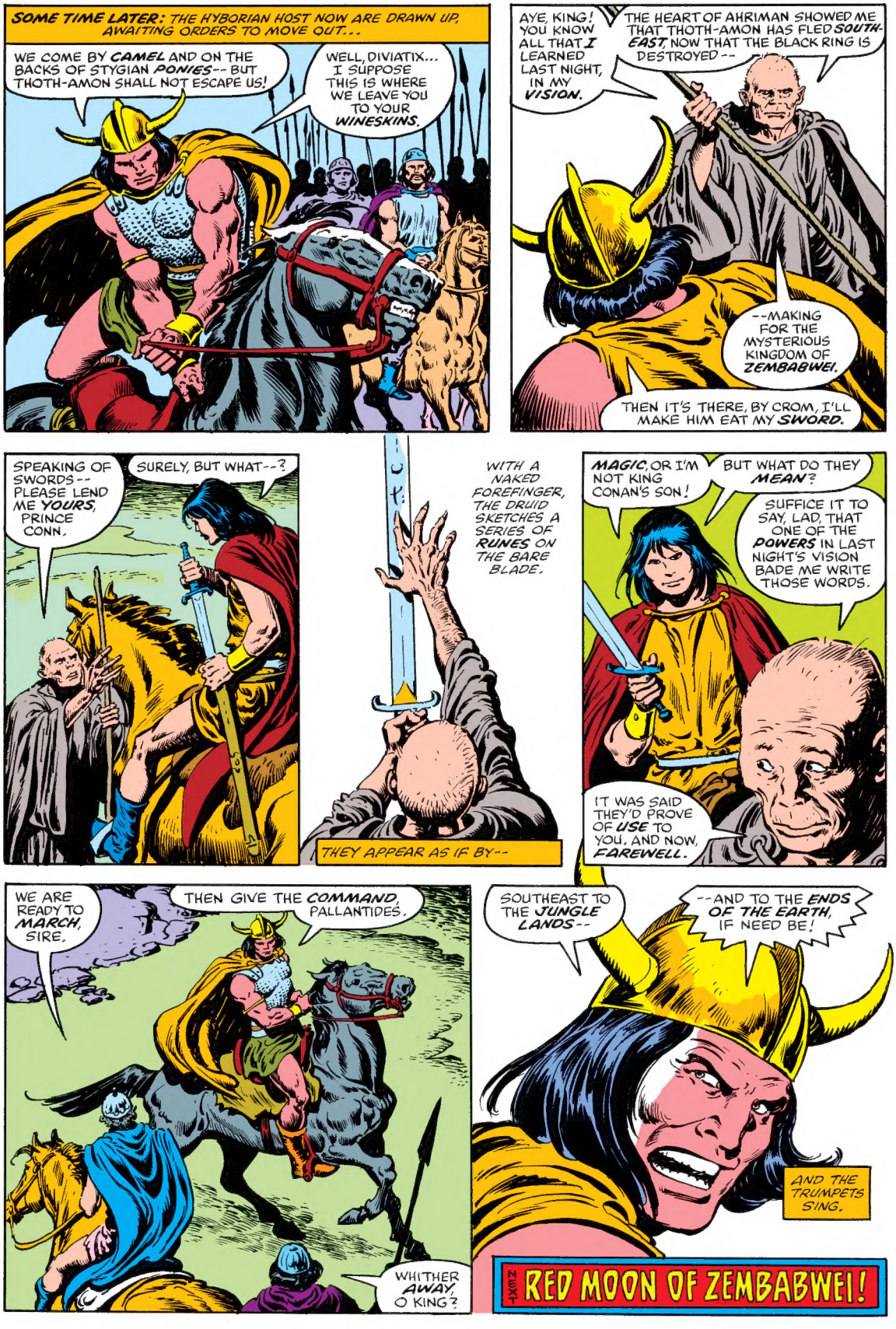
THE STYGIANS, FOR THEIR PART, DO NOT LACK COURAGE... AND THEIR SECOND-IN-COMMAND ORDERS ONE DESPERATE CHARGE, HORRIFIED THOUGH HE BE.

BUT THE BLACK BEAST SWEEPS HIS MEN TO EARTH WITH SLASHING CLAWS AND SNAPPING JAWS AS FAST AS THEY COME WITHIN REACH!


AT LAST THE SET-WORSHIPPERS GO MAD WITH HORROR, TRAMPLING ONE ANOTHER IN THEIR HASTE TO FLEE.
YET, AFTER THEM COMES THE THING.
HII HI
EVER IT SLAYS... AND SLAYS... AND SLAYS.

AT LONG LAST, THE SUN'S GOLDEN DISC LIFTS ABOVE THE DESERT BEYOND THE BAKHR...


THE DARK MONSTER RAISES ITS HEAD, AT DAWN'S FULL LIGHT, FROM THE SLAUGHTER...
...SHIVERING STRANGELY AS THE SUN'S INIMICAL RAYS STRIKE IT...
...AND SQUEEZES ITS GREAT BULK BACK THROUGH THE HUGE PORTAL IN THE CARVEN SPHINX'S BREAST.
THEN IT IS GONE, AND THE VAST STONE DOOR BOOMS SHUT BEHIND IT.
WILL IT RETURN, DIVIATIX?
NAY, KING. NOT, AT LEAST, TILL NIGHT-FALL.
WE'LL BE READY FOR IT THEN, EH, FATHER?
BITE YOUR TONGUE, LAD! WE'LL BE FAR FROM HERE, WON'T WE, SIRE-- IF WE CAN FIND SOME HORSES, THAT IS?
AYE, TROCERO. THE STYGIAN HOST MOSTLY FLED ON FOOT, THROWN BY THEIR MOUNTS AMID THE TERROR OF THE BLACK BEAST.
WE'LL GATHER UP SUCH OF THEIR HORSES AS LIVE.
BACK AT THE CAMP, BLOODIED BUT UNBEATEN, THE AQUILONIAN TROOPS CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE THEIR OWN DELIVERANCE...
...AND THEY HAIL CONAN AS THE BRINGER OF THE DARK MONSTER THAT SAVED THEM... WHICH, IN A SENSE, HE WAS.
ALL HAIL KING CONAN!
FIND PALLANTIDES, COUNT, AND ORGANIZE THE RECOVERY!
DIVIATIX AND I HAVE SOME PLANNING TO DO.


SOME TIME LATER: THE HYBORIAN HOST NOW ARE DRAWN UP, AWAITING ORDERS TO MOVE OUT...
WE COME BY CAMEL AND ON THE BACKS OF STYGIAN PONIES-- BUT THOTH-AMON SHALL NOT ESCAPE US!
WELL, DIVIATIX... I SUPPOSE THIS IS WHERE WE LEAVE YOU TO YOUR WINESKINS.
AYE, KING! YOU KNOW ALL THAT I LEARNED LAST NIGHT, IN MY VISION.
THE HEART OF AHRIMAN SHOWED ME THAT THOTH-AMON HAS FLED SOUTH-EAST, NOW THAT THE BLACK RING IS DESTROYED --
--MAKING FOR THE MYSTERIOUS KINGDOM OF ZEMBABWEI.
THEN IT'S THERE, BY CROM, I'LL MAKE HIM EAT MY SWORD.
SPEAKING OF SWORDS -- PLEASE LEND ME YOURS, PRINCE CONN.
SURELY, BUT WHAT--?
WITH A NAKED FOREFINGER, THE DRUID SKETCHES A SERIES OF RUNES ON THE BARE BLADE.
THEY APPEAR AS IF BY--
MAGIC, OR I'M NOT KING CONAN'S SON!
BUT WHAT DO THEY MEAN?
SUFFICE IT TO SAY, LAD, THAT ONE OF THE POWERS IN LAST NIGHT'S VISION BADE ME WRITE THOSE WORDS.
IT WAS SAID THEY'D PROVE OF USE TO YOU, AND NOW, FAREWELL.
WE ARE READY TO MARCH, SIRE.
THEN GIVE THE COMMAND, PALLANTIDES.
WHITHER AWAY, O KING?
SOUTHEAST TO THE JUNGLE LANDS--
--AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, IF NEED BE!
AND THE TRUMPETS SING.
NEXT RED MOON OF ZEMBABWEI!